

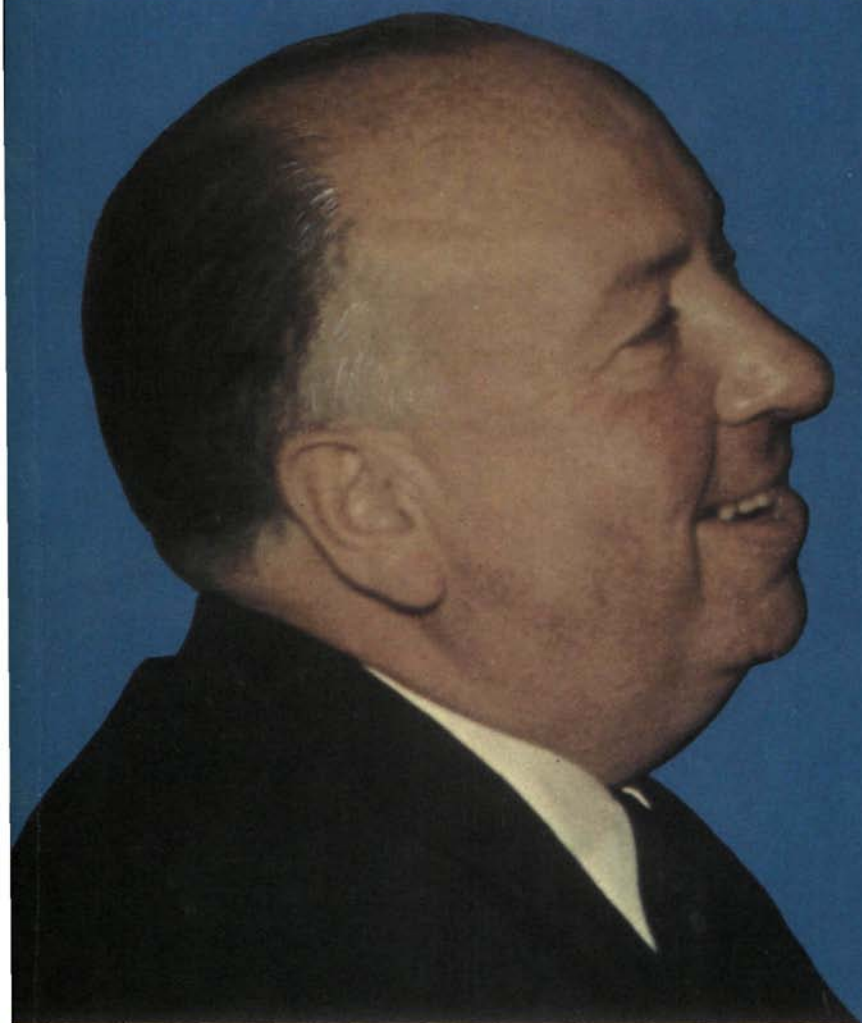
ALFRED

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HITCHCOCK'S

MYSTERY MAGAZINE



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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

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With the thought that "all men are created equal," one must hope the killer instinct is an acquired trait.



A BORN KILLER



By Max Van Derveer

LARRY POLE snapped home the bolt of the rifle and grinned at Peter. "I'm damned," he said, "if you aren't the most opposite guy I've ever known. One minute you kill as if by nature and the next minute you befriend a mongrel pup."

Peter chuckled. "I like kids, too, Larry."

"Yeah, that'd figure."

"Kids and dogs."

Peter stroked the head of the mangy pup he had found. He was content. He had known Larry Pole eleven days. Pole had come in as a replacement, and they had been

teamed by the lieutenant. Pole had a wife and a child in Chicago; that's all Peter really knew about the man, and in the beginning he had treated Pole as he did all new acquaintances, with caution. Most people, when they discovered who Peter really was, attempted to feed on him; but not Larry Pole. He had seemed unimpressed when he first heard the name Peter Holiday, and he had remained unimpressed. Pole seemed to like him for the chemistry inside. For that reason, Peter Holiday liked Larry Pole.

Now they sat side by side on a little hump of ground deep inside the tall grass. Out there ahead of them, obliterated for the moment by the height of the grass, was the war: the Viet Cong, the snipers, the suicide squads. But here inside the grass there was quiet and peace and friendship and the dog. The pup was infested with lice, and Peter picked carefully.

"Kids, dogs and killing." Larry Pole shook his head. "Boy, that's some combination."

Peter laughed softly. Pole's observation pleased him, because here in Vietnam he had discovered himself to be a born killer. He had the instinct and desire and never had known exhilaration such as that experienced when he was able to watch another man die by his gun, knife or hand; but put a pup or a

child before him, and there was a different man. That Peter Holiday—fantastically wealthy by birth and now the only son of a widowed mother—was gentle, understanding and sympathetic.

"I guess my makeup is a bit different," Peter admitted. "Until now I've never felt whole, but I'm a complete man here, Larry; confident, in balance. It's as if there has been a void in my life until now."

Pole continued to wag his head. "Man, the way I hear it, there can't have been too many holes in your life. Some of the guys say you could buy the U. N. building if you took the notion."

"I know wealth and its comforts, yes," Peter nodded. "But something has been missing, too."

"Until you got into this man's Army, huh?"

Peter was somber. "Until I killed my first man, Larry."

"Hey, pal, you don't wanna figure that way! That ain't healthy thinking! A guy gets to figuring he has to kill to be happy and it's like riding the drug needle. Strictly acid."

Peter, amused by Pole's concern, laughed. He found a new patch of lice on the pup and picked. "Maybe I should have been born a hood. A professional killer."

"No. Nobody should be born a killer!"

The lieutenant's voice came over the grass and down to them: "Holiday? Pole?"

They stood, the grass waved against their chests, and the sniper's bullet went through the pup's head and into Peter's body.

Peter was discharged and sent home to the California mansion and the pampering, blue-rinsed mother, but neither was salve for the depression that had settled on him. A sniper's bullet had made him an incomplete man; he was out of balance again. He fretted. He knew the medicine he needed, but there were laws and mores here . . .

He was not sure when the idea came to him but he was suddenly acutely conscious of the relief he experienced with it. His first thoughts centered on someone unknown, a nonentity, perhaps a wino in a dark alley.

No good. A defenseless man would not bring total satisfaction.

He turned his attention to people he disliked; there were many. He had to plan, lure. He already could smell the danger. His blood ran fast. Who was to be his victim? Man or woman? Young or old?

"Mr. Peter?"

At the soft sound of the child's voice Peter shot forward in the webbed pool chair, suddenly stopped. He forced an easy grin

as he stared briefly at the blue water of the swimming pool, then he faced the blonde child who stood beside his chair.

The child was small and trim, very delicate in construction. She belonged to Clarence, the combination chauffeur and handyman who now was beyond the pool, polishing the sedan in the shadow of the three-stall garage, and to Helga, who was currently busy in the kitchen of the main house. The child was Peter's friend and now she stood inquisitively silent with the dachshund pup at her feet. The pup sat with his short forelegs spread and stiff, his head cocked slightly, his long ears drooping, his large eyes bright and questioning, too.

Peter widened his grin and reached out to scratch the pup's head. "Fritzie," he said, and then he looked directly into the child's deep blue eyes. "What is it, Maryanne?"

The child fidgeted. "Are we . . . going to the beach this afternoon? You'n me and Fritzie?"

Peter chuckled and teased, "Do you want to go to the beach?"

"Yes."

"All right. How 'bout . . . oh, say, around four o'clock? I want to nap and then—"

"Oh, goodie . . . and thank you, Mr. Peter!"

The child ran off around the end of the swimming pool, the pup scuttling along beside her. "Daddy!" she shrilled. "Mr. Peter is going to take us to the beach."

Peter entered the house through the French doors that opened onto the pool patio and stretched out on a couch. He smiled. The frolicking child and dog pleased him. He found it difficult to turn his mind to darker thoughts.

Then his mother came through the French doors. She wore a brilliant yellow sunsuit and a huge, floppy hat this early afternoon, and there was the sheen of perspiration on her pink skin. She smiled fondly at Peter as she swept off the hat. He grimaced inside.

"I'm going up to bathe now, Peter," she announced.

"Okay."

Her smile faded. She came to him, placed hot fingers on the cords of his neck, squeezed gently. He tightened but managed to lie without stirring.

"Is something wrong?" his mother asked gently.

"No. I'm fine, Mother."

"You seem so . . . well, dejected."

"Everything is fine, Mother."

"I wish . . ." The fingers left his neck. "Won't you reconsider, darling? Let's take a trip to the Riviera."

"I'm content here."

She shuffled. "I keep thinking a change of scenery might be what—"

"No. I don't want to go anywhere."

"Well . . . all right," she said softly, and started out of the room, walking toward the carpeted stairway.

Peter stared after her. Actually, she looked absurd in the yellow sunsuit. She was far too old for sunsuits. She was fleshy and uncoordinated. There were globs of fat in her legs and her arms. Her years of being attractive, exciting and useful were far behind her.

She disappeared up the stairway, and the mansion was still in the afternoon heat that poured in the open French doors. Peter got up, went to the door and stood looking across the patio and the blue water of the pool. Clarence continued to polish the sedan. Maryanne and Fritzie had romped off to another corner of the grounds. Peter squinted against the brilliant reflection of sunshine off the glass-like surface of the pool and listened hard. Clarence and the child were out of the way, but what about Helga?

Peter closed the French doors and moved quietly toward the kitchen. The smell of fresh-baked bread filled his nostrils. He stopped when he heard Helga humming off tune. His heartbeat quickened. He suddenly was perspiring profusely.

Then it was as if an icy wind had swept him. He shuddered and stood absolutely still. He was abruptly relaxed and confident. He turned and went back to the stairway and up.

His mother gasped surprise when he burst in on her as she sat in the tub of scented water. He slapped a palm against the back of her neck and shoved her head forward and down into the water before she could scream. She struggled with surprising strength, but he managed to keep her face under the surface of the water until she went limp. Then he dried himself on her towel and returned downstairs. He felt very alive, very content. He stretched out on a couch again and went to sleep. When Helga shook him awake, she was ashen and on the verge of hysteria.

"M-Mr. Peter . . ." she gasped. "C-come . . . come . . . your mother . . . oh, it's terrible!"

The police were quietly efficient in their investigation. A Sergeant Oxford was in charge. He questioned patiently and seemed to accept Clarence's explanation of polishing the car, Helga's declaration of baking bread, and Peter's story of napping on the couch on which he was now sitting.

"At the moment," Sergeant Oxford nodded, "we are assuming Mrs. Holiday suffered a heart at-

tack. The autopsy will prove us correct or incorrect conclusively."

"I'm not . . . sure I understand, Sergeant," Peter said curiously.

"It will be a matter of water in the lungs. Our technicians should be able to determine if she was dead before she pitched forward into the bath water or—"

"She has a history of fainting spells," Peter interrupted.

Helga and Clarence nodded in unison.

"I see," said Sergeant Oxford. "Then perhaps that is what happened. She may have become faint and attempted to leave the tub. That would explain the damp towel we found on the floor. She may have reached for the towel, started to dry, then fainted."

"Sergeant," Peter asked carefully, "are you harboring an idea about murder?"

"Natural death, accidental death, self-inflicted, or murder—my job, Mr. Holiday, is to determine which in cases of this nature."

"Not murder, Sergeant," Peter shook his head vigorously.

Helga and Clarence stood like stone statues.

The official ruling was accidental death by drowning. There was autopsy evidence pointing to Mrs. Holiday having suffered a heart seizure while bathing, attempting to leave the tub and then pitching

forward into the bath water. It was speculated that the seizure had prevented her from crying out.

Six weeks later, when the attorneys had finished their mulling, Helga and Clarence each received their \$5,000 in cash from Mrs. Holiday's estate and Peter doled out his large inheritance to his mother's favored charities. He did not need the wealth—he had his own from his father's death—and the donations seemed to satisfy the police, seemed to eliminate lingering suspicions the police had about a son drowning a mother for inheritance.

The telephone call came on a Tuesday night two months to the day following Mrs. Holiday's death. Peter was surprised, then pleased.

"Larry?" Peter said quizzically, then, "What are you doing in California?"

"Hi yah, old buddy. Came out to see you." Pole's voice was dull, listless.

Peter frowned.

Pole said, "No touches, pal. But I'd like to see you. It's important to me."

Pole looked as if the months had been hard on him. There were permanent wrinkles across his forehead, dark patches under his eyes and lines at the corners of his mouth.

Peter, curtailing his curiosity, showed Larry around. Pole was im-

pressed with both the grounds and the house. His gaze held genuine awe as Peter escorted him. He said, "You've got it, haven't you, Peter? You've got it all."

Peter shrugged. "How have things been going, Larry?"

Pole lit a cigarette. His movements were jerky. The match flame quivered.

Peter said truthfully, "You look beat."

Pole attempted a grin. "Got me a little auto repair shop in Chi now. I'm on my own, but the competition is keen. I've been working like a dog."

"Are you out here alone? I expected to meet your family. Let's see, there is a wife and a daughter—"

"Beth and I separated," Pole interrupted. "She's remarried." He drew on the cigarette quickly. "The familiar story. I came home from the war, she had another man, a Hollywood type, a stunt man for some studio. Someone was making a movie in Chi and this guy and Beth met. But I give her credit for one thing. She didn't attempt to hide anything, told me about this dude the day I got home. I took Karen, our daughter, and moved out. I have a small apartment. My mother lives with us, helps me care for Karen. But my ex is giving me trouble now. She's attempting to

take Karen from me. Karen is the only reason Beth hasn't left Chicago yet."

"Karen must be about six?"

"Near."

"We have a little girl here. Maryanne also is six."

Pole looked totally surprised. "You've married, Peter?"

"No." Peter grinned. "Maryanne is the child of my chauffeur and maid. They live in the house you saw at the back of the grounds."

Pole exhaled loudly. "Boy, you being married could've queered—" He cut off the words abruptly.

"What is it, Larry?"

"Something happened, Peter. To Karen," Pole attempted a grin; it was sick. "Can I talk you out of a tall drink?"

At the bar, Pole requested a straight shot of bourbon. He put the drink down quickly. Peter frowned and poured again. Pole drank and then he surprised Peter. He said, "I was sorry to hear about your mother."

Peter built two bourbon and water highballs and they went outside to sit on the pool patio. "How did you know about my mother, Larry?" Peter asked carefully.

Pole shrugged. "The Holiday name makes the papers, Peter. Even the Chicago papers. Heart attack in a bathtub, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"Did she drown, or did the attack kill her?" he wanted to know.

"She drowned."

"I'm not sure the papers ever said." Pole drank half the highball. "I've always figured drowning would be a helluva way to die."

"Death is death," Peter said flatly.

Pole nodded. "Yes, death never did frighten you, I remember. You are the coldest man I've ever known when it comes to death."

"What are you shooting at, Larry?"

Pole sat silent, staring at the pool for several seconds, then his eyes met Peter's and held. "I want a man killed, Peter," he said.

Peter speculated, attempting to mask what he suddenly felt inside. "Your former wife's new husband?"

"No."

"Then what happened to your daughter?"

In a sudden movement, Pole made an animal sound low in his throat, started up out of the chair, caught himself, stopped.

Peter sat motionless. The outburst of violence had caught him short. He had never known this Larry Pole, not even in the fiercest Vietnam hand-to-hand combat. This Larry Pole was near disintegration.

"Larry?"

Pole sat back, slumped, staring. "Unload," said Peter, keeping his voice soft, "before you explode."

"I want you to kill a child molester," Pole said, his tone just above a whisper. "A dirty, rotten, sniveling, sneaking child molester. The worst kind of man. The very worst kind . . ."

Peter's heart was suddenly beating fast. "Your Karen?"

"Yes." Pole's face twisted under a spasm of emotion. He was shaking. "In an alley, Peter. It happened in an alley in broad daylight. The child screamed. The man ran. But the child's screams were heard, and the man was overpowered as he ran out of the alley. He was not caught in the act. He was caught as he ran. He was arrested and held on suspicion after the child was found. But Karen could not talk. She was too frightened, too bewildered. All she knew was she had been hurt. She cried. She still cries. In her sleep. Every night. You should hear her whimpering. You should hear—"

"The man," Peter broke in. "What about the man?"

"Arrested, accused, freed. No proof. No witnesses. Only a child who cringed and could not bring herself to speak every time she was taken before him."

"But there must have been the report of a medical examination."

"Yes." Pole sounded dead. "It said there was the *possibility* of inflicted injury. On the other hand . . . the injury could have been *self-inflicted* or *accidental*!"

Peter sat taut as a bow string. A simmering rage bubbled inside him. He was aware there were child molesters, of course, animals that never should have been given life, but never had the awareness been brought so close to him; and the thought, the conjured image of a grown man, as he moved in lecherously on a tiny, golden, innocent child . . .

Peter closed his eyes in an effort to shut out the image. "Larry," he said finally, "why haven't you already killed this man?"

"I've been close, Peter. You don't know how close. But if I do, who will the police turn to first?"

"So you have come to me."

"I remember you in Viet, Peter. I remember how you killed, as if you were stepping on an insect."

"That was war."

"War had nothing to do with what was going through your mind every time a man went down in front of you."

"I could have changed, Larry."

The words seemed to jar Pole. He sat like stone for several seconds, as if an impossibility had been thrust upon him and he was incapable of comprehending. Fi-

nally he quivered. His head dropped, hung. "Yes." It was all he said.

Peter stood. He drained the last of the drink from his glass, then looked at his friend.

Pole took a fold of bills from his pocket. "I have exactly one thousand and fifty dollars to my name, plus a return train ticket to Chicago," he said.

Peter shook his head. "I don't need money, Larry," he said coldly. "All I need is the insect."

The accused man surprised Peter. He lived alone in a modest, North-side Chicago apartment house, and he was clean-shaven, tall, straight, willowy, perhaps forty years of age, and dressed in a white shirt, plaid necktie and dark slacks when he answered Peter's ring.

Peter attacked without preamble. He chopped a solid blow into the man's solar plexus, rammed the man's shoulders with open palms, then followed the staggered victim into the front room of the apartment. The man went down to the floor, his hands clawing his middle. He was gasping and gagging. Peter caught the plaid necktie, whipped it around the man's neck and tugged until the man was dead.

Peter left the apartment building and went to a bar. He was satisfied. He drank two drinks and then

found a steak house. He ate slowly, his mood darkened. The instinct of self-preservation stole over him. He did not like his thoughts but he could not escape them. Could Larry Pole hold up under periodic and penetrating questioning by the police? Or would Pole break, confess everything; name the killer?

Peter was unhappy when he left the steak house, but what was ahead had to be done before it was too late. He rode in a cab and forty-five minutes later he put a thumb against a doorbell.

Larry Pole went to pieces when he opened the door. He gawked, then stepped back into the flat. "Wh-at . . . are you doing here?"

"Is your mother here?"

"She took . . . Karen to a movie."

Peter swept the blow up from down low. His knuckles lifted Larry Pole's jaw. Pole sprawled against the back of a faded couch. Peter clamped his hands against Pole's neck and hung on until Pole quit breathing.

Peter stood, breathing hard. He stood for a long time, quieting, then he listened hard. He heard nothing, but he saw a torn teddy bear propped in a corner of the room. His eyes danced to a framed photograph of a pretty girl child. He winced. Karen's grandmother would have to take care of her now . . .

Peter left the apartment. The corridor was empty. He went down three flights of steps quickly, hesitated as he saw the foyer door open, then continued on down the steps.

A long-legged woman had entered the building and started up the steps. She turned suddenly and

stared at Peter. He turned on a grin and nodded to her, tipped his hat as he passed her. He thought her an attractive woman; she had red-brown hair. But she bothered him, too. He looked back over his shoulder as he was leaving the building. The woman was still staring at him, her face creased in a frown.



Peter hustled down steps to the sidewalk and left Chicago immediately.

The initial shock came in late October while a heat wave still was clutching the low California coast. Peter sat on the public beach, at ease. He was alone today. Clarence and Helga had taken the child Maryanne and the dog Fritzie in to the city. He liked the public beach; he liked to watch the children and their dogs romp.

Then suddenly Peter sat frozen.

A woman, her hair the color of aged brick, her skin a pale white against the brilliance of the loose green blouse and tight green hip skimmers, marched past him. Clinging to the woman's hand, but unable to match the woman's long-legged strides, was a young girl.

The image of a framed photograph he had viewed only once in a Chicago flat was suddenly alive in Peter's mind and he almost exploded, "Karen!"

He clamped his teeth and ducked his head between raised knees. Then he followed the woman and the child out of the corner of his eye. He had not seen the woman's face as she passed in front of him. Now he wanted to see that face as he recalled a brief meeting on a brownstone stairway. When the woman and the child were thirty

yards down the beach and still striding strong, Peter went after them, prepared to turn and dive into the lapping surf if the woman slowed.

He watched the woman and the child curve across the sand to the back of the beach, climb a slight slope and walk onto a macadam parking area. They got into a dusty sedan, the child climbing into a back seat where a large boxer lapped fondly at her. The woman sat in the front seat beside a man. The sedan was backed, and Peter saw the Illinois license plate. Then the car rolled smoothly out of the parking area and entered the glut of highway traffic.

The second shock came the following morning when Clarence burst onto the pool patio where Peter was breakfasting. Clarence looked as if he had been struck with a club. "Mister Peter," he gasped, "Fritzie is dead! Down near the front fence! He's just stretched out down there..."

Peter examined the dog with fingers that quivered.

"Mister Peter..."

Peter said nothing. He remained on one knee, staring. A child and a woman on a beach one day, Fritzie dead the next day.

The telephone call came that afternoon: "Mr. Holiday?"

He grimaced against the soft

sound of the woman's voice.
"Yes?"

"My name is Beth Warner. It used to be Beth Pole. You saw me on the beach yesterday afternoon. You saw my daughter. I think we should converse. We are at the Motor Inn West, unit 496. Shall we say in the next thirty minutes? The Inn is only a twenty minute drive from your home as I'm sure you know."

"I am occupied this afternoon, Mrs. Warner."

"Not that occupied, Mr. Holiday. I was fond of Larry even though we were not compatible in marriage."

"Larry?"

The woman sighed. "Come now, Mr. Holiday. You and Larry were such good friends in the war. He wrote often about you. He even sent a snapshot of the two of you once. I still have that snapshot, Mr. Holiday. Remember when it was taken?"

Peter remembered.

"You startled me on the stairway in Chicago one night not too long ago, Mr. Holiday. I thought I should know you and yet I knew we had never met. I was very confused—until I went through a photograph album later that night."

"I haven't been in Chicago in the last two years, Mrs. Warner."

"Please, Mr. Holiday. I could

have gone to the police. I think the police would not find it difficult to link you and Larry. They might even be capable of linking you to another dead man whose body was discovered on the same night as my former husband's."

"Mrs. Warner—"

"Let's discuss cash, Mr. Holiday! And soon! One half hour, Motor Inn West, unit 496. We'll be expecting you!"

Peter had three quick drinks before he took out the .38 he kept in the wall safe. He hefted the gun in his palm as he quickly contemplated his escape following the mass slaying. He could drive south into Baja, abandon the car, disappear, but that would take money, as much cash as he could jam into his pockets. He reached into the safe again, then paused.

Running was no good. Anyway, why kill now? Beth Warner only wanted to *talk* about money today. The exchange would take place at another time. Perhaps he could determine the site of that exchange. Perhaps he could select a remote place and—under those conditions—he might not have to kill the child...

Beth Warner again wore the green blouse and hip skimmers when she opened the door of the motel unit. Peter thought her long and skillfully drawn, a very calm

woman. Her eyes were a deep gray and bright; she had used only a touch of makeup.

"Karen is at the swimming pool," she said. "Under supervision, naturally. And my husband is in the bathroom. He is armed. Then there is . . ." She swung the door wide and allowed Peter to see the boxer. "... Friend," she said. "Our dog, who is quite *unfriendly* when someone shows signs of attacking one of us. We got him when I got Karen; normally he is with her, he protects her, but he also has a loyalty to all of us and I thought it best this afternoon . . ." She paused again. "Mr. Holiday, do come inside."

It was a large unit, and in the far wall a door stood slightly ajar. Peter saw the figure of a man through the opening, but he could not see a gun.

Beth Warner sat on the end of the bed, crossed her legs. The dog sat near her, his eyes never leaving Peter.

Peter drew himself together, prepared for battle. This woman was to be a pertinacious adversary. That much was already evident.

She said, "I'm sure we understand each other."

"Do we?"

"One hundred thousand, Mr. Holiday. I want one hundred thousand dollars in cash."

"Absurd!" he stormed angrily. "Silence can be expensive."

"One, Mrs. Warner, I do not have a hundred thousand dollars in cash. Two, what can you prove? Three—"

"One, Mr. Holiday," she interrupted, "you can *get* a hundred thousand dollars in cash. Two, I can put you in Chicago on the night of the death of two men. Three—"

"But you can't *prove* anything!"

"True. But I *can* turn the police loose on you. I *can* trigger an investigation."

"So trigger!"

"Is that what you really want? You are a millionaire, Mr. Holiday. You live free of most of the burdens of this world. Even the thought of confinement in prison—or death in prison—should be unpleasant to you. And *you could have slipped*, Mr. Holiday. You could have left a fingerprint, something . . ."

Peter took a step toward her. The boxer came up. Lips skinned back from very white teeth.

Beth Warner said, "No. Don't, Mr. Holiday, or Friend will have you."

Peter stood rooted.

Suddenly Beth Warner sighed and stood. "Look, I'm going to give you two days to consider my proposition—and to decide how

and where you will get the cash. Fair enough?"

Peter shook his head.

"Are you refusing me, or is all of this difficult to believe?"

"A hundred thousand dollars you want . . ."

It was all Peter said. He turned and walked out of the unit. He continued to wag his head, but he was acting now. Beth Warner was not as fearsome a foe as he had at first thought. She was giving him two days grace. It was plenty of time in which to kill—but that night he discovered the Warners had checked out of the motel.

He cursed the woman long and loud. Then he calmed, sat thinking. Was it possible the Warners were backing off? Was it possible they had considered the threat of having him lurk over them like an invisible terror for the remainder of their lives? Perhaps they had panicked under the consideration. Perhaps they had returned to Chicago, decided against . . .

The telephone call came on the third night. The Warners had returned to Chicago, all right, but Beth Warner had not panicked. She had merely been cautious. "Somehow," she said over the wire, "we feel safer here. And now that you have determined how you will raise the cash—"

"I haven't," Peter said bluntly.

"I've decided against paying you."

"I see." Beth Warner was silent for a moment before she said, "Then you can expect the police on your doorstep in the morning."

"Now look," Peter shouted, "a hundred thousand dollars is an absurd amount! My money is invested! To get cash I would have to—"

"We'll give you one month."

"Wh-at!"

"One month in which to convert, do the things you have to do without raising a lot of suspicion and speculation among the money people. And during that month we are going to travel. So you will be wasting time if you come here looking for us. Do you understand?"

"Mrs. Warner, please . . ."

"Please?" She sounded surprised. "Is that the same thing Larry said when you strangled him?" She hung up.

Peter put the cache of \$100.00 bills together slowly. He fretted, he schemed, he seethed, and he killed the Warners over and over again in his thoughts and his dreams, but gradually the cache took on stature. Then he received a letter from Austin, Texas. The money was to be delivered in Chicago at 10 p.m. on the fourth Wednesday in December.

It was brittle cold in Chicago

that night. The city was coated with ice and the taxi driver grumbled all the way to the apartment house address Peter had given him.

Beth Warner was radiant in a lavender, off-the-shoulder party dress when she opened the apartment door to his ring. There was a glass in her hand. Behind her, the party swirled. The noise swelled out to surround Peter.

Beth Warner smiled. "It's sort of a going-away party," she said, waving the glass aimlessly, "since we are leaving tomorrow for a long stay in Switzerland." She laughed. "Also, I thought it safer to have friends around when you arrived. I didn't want to be strangled in a doorway. I assume the briefcase you are carrying contains money?"

Peter passed the briefcase to her and turned down the carpeted corridor. Her laughter followed him. "Thanks..." she called out.

Peter seethed inside a tiny bar two blocks from the apartment building, but he nursed his drinks. He had to keep his head. If the Warners got to Switzerland he could forget about retrieving the money. It would go into a Swiss bank and the Warners could live luxuriously until it was time to demand more money. He had to kill the Warners tonight.

He left the bar, hunched deep inside the heavy coat. Cold air

closed his nostrils, stung his lungs. He was forced to mouth breathe, but there was warmth in the feel of the gun with its silencer in his coat pocket. Money wasn't the only thing he had collected during the month. He had purchased a gun that could not be traced.

He walked back toward the apartment building. The party could last the night, but he had to wait it out. He rounded a corner and slowed. The apartment building was ahead. So was activity: a cluster of people, two police cars with red dome lights swirling, an ambulance with red lights blinking.

Peter drew closer, in time to see a covered body put into the ambulance.

"Damn fool..." muttered an elderly man beside him.

"What happened?"

"Some nut. They say he tried to walk one of them ledges up there." The man pointed up the apartment building. "They say he was drunk, tried to walk a ledge from one window to another. Jeez, didn't he know them ledges are icy? Damn fool."

Peter listened in as a woman, shivering inside a long fur coat, shrilled at a policeman, "He fell, that's all I can tell you! We were having a party! Dave was drunk! Then somebody suggested—"

"David Warner?" the policeman interrupted.

"Yes, that's his name!" the woman said. "Dave Warner! It was his party! His and Beth's! Dave was a stunt man! You know? With the movies? Anyway, someone dared him to walk the ledge—I don't remember who—and the crazy fool tried it! Lordy, can't we go inside? I'm freezing to death!"

Peter turned away and walked the icy sidewalk with new respect for Beth Warner. There was no doubt in his mind who had suggested the ledge walk; and there was no doubt *why* she had suggested it.

On the other hand, Beth Warner wasn't going to be leaving the United States the next day. Nor was she going to deposit a hundred thousand in a bank. Police would want to know how she had come into such a huge sum of money on the night her husband had died.

Thursday afternoon was gray and miserable. The sky spit tiny snowflakes. Peter sat in the rented car across the street from the apartment building. It was four-twenty-five now and his patience had worn thin. It had been a long afternoon of watching, and he was about to give up. *If* Beth Warner was inside the building, she was not coming out. He would have to

catch her alone another time. On the other hand, she might already be out of the city, might already be winging toward Switzerland.

Crazy! Peter slapped the steering wheel and started the car motor for what seemed the thousandth time. Heat poured from under the seat. He pulled himself erect. The police would never allow Beth Warner to leave the city the day after her husband had tumbled from a building ledge. There still would be many questions.

Peter suddenly sat like stone. A taxi had braked at the curb in front of the apartment building. He watched Beth Warner leave the cab and dash across the sidewalk. Should he go after her? He started to leave the car, then stopped. There was a child, a dog, to contend with. He settled back. How was he to get Beth Warner out of the apartment now that she was inside? Telephoning her would be useless. The instant she heard his voice she would hang up. He attempted to plot, but his thoughts were scrambled, and he finally was forced to face reality. His only safe approach was when he could trap her alone and unaware. Surprise her.

He saw the child leave the building with the boxer trotting at her side, yet it was several seconds be-

fore realization struck him. Beth Warner was suddenly alone!

Peter scrambled from the car and crossed the street quickly. He paused, looked after the child and the boxer. They were at an intersection now, waiting for a traffic light to change. He stared at the child and the dog. In his mind they suddenly were Maryanne and Fritz. He shook his head, cleared his thoughts, forced himself to blot out all images except that of the woman who now was alone in an apartment.

Beth Warner was immediately frightened when she opened the door to his ring. She attempted to slam the door. The door stopped against his foot. He used both hands and sent her reeling back inside the apartment. He saw her mouth open, knew the scream was coming. He took out the gun and fired it. Then she was on the carpeting, twitching. He stood and watched her die. Suddenly he moved to the door and put his ear against it, listening hard. The gun had made noise in spite of the silence.

When he was satisfied, he moved swiftly. He searched in frenzy. The child and the dog could return at any moment. It was too cold a day, too late in a day for the child to be gone long. She probably had been sent to a store to make a quick

purchase of some necessity . . .

He found the suitcase under a bed. The packages of money looked undisturbed. He returned to the front room. Inside four days he would be on the Riviera.

The grilled face of a wall heating vent caught his eye. He stopped. He could rid himself of the gun now. He could remove the grill, pitch the gun down the pipe, replace the grill, then be gone.

He shook his head. His safest move was to vacate the apartment.

The sound of a key in the door lock stiffened him. He cringed. "No . . ."

Then the door swung open and he had a brief glimpse of a child and a boxer before the child screamed and the dog leaped.

He fired a shot. The dog writhed in midair and howled, then crashed into him, sending him spilling back and down. He rolled. The dog flopped from him, was quiet.

But the child still screamed. She stood in the doorway, hunching into herself, her tiny hands covering her face, her eyes wide in terror. She screamed. And screamed. And screamed . . .

Peter lifted the gun on the child. But he could not squeeze the trigger.

Dogs and children.

Why had he ever liked either?

A tree is beautiful only so long as it screens the loathsome serpent in its branches.



HOLIDAY



BLUE LIGHT trembled above the hotel; guests were already sitting in the open dining room beyond the pool when a girl appeared on the upper terrace. Down the stone stairway she came, sandals clacking, white bathing suit startling in the dusky light.

She was another lone female tourist, but different from the others. At the pool-edge she adjusted her cap and plunged in. Twice she swam the length of the pool, then floated on her back, sensuously. Roger watched her casually; no point in getting excited when she'd never more than nodded to him.

Footsteps made him turn. The hotel manager smiled. "Not dining again, Mr. Peters?"

"No appetite in this heat."

The girl in the water swam to the pool-edge, and the manager turned to her. "Enjoying a dip, Miss Boyd?"

"Yes, the heat in the city was dreadful. Isn't it ever cool there?"

"Never. By the way, may I join you at your table this evening?"

"You could, but I'm not dining."

"I'm disappointed. Reconsider?"

Miss Boyd climbed from the pool, asked for a cigarette. The manager felt his pockets, shrugged, and Roger offered his pack and a light. The manager introduced them. A moment later he was called to the desk. Annoyed, he started away, stopped. "A dance at the Royal Palm tonight. I hope to have the pleasure . . ."

"Sorry, I'm not going."

"I'm more than sorry." The manager shrugged and walked away. Miss Boyd removed her rubber cap, shook her hair. "He really is sorry," she said to Roger.

"What does that mean?"

"All the men are in this place. They've only one thing in mind."

"Perhaps because there's nothing else to do."

Miss Boyd laughed. "I suppose one can't blame them. Do you think it's the climate?"

"They're probably trying to prove they're men and lovers."

"Well, making love is one way of proving it."

"Not necessarily. And certainly not when one is married, like Mr. LaFarge."

"He doesn't miss a trick, but you sound married, or perhaps you're a prude."

"Neither one nor the other."

"But you object to Mr. LaFarge's activities?"

"I don't give a damn about him and his activities."

Miss Boyd smiled. "You're from New York?"

"Who here isn't?"

"True. I came down to get away from the place, and everybody I've run into is from the big town."

"Disappointed?"

"In that respect, but the island's beautiful."

"Too hot and too lush. I prefer a cooler climate, but doctor's orders. I needed a rest, I can't say I haven't rested."

"So I've noticed."

"Really? I didn't think you knew I existed."

"The only male who hasn't made some kind of pass. I thought you might be queer."

"No such problem," Roger smiled. "As for you, I had my own thoughts."

"You thought I was?"

"Oh, no, just a bit of a snob, but at least you're not like the other loners, all hunting for a man."

"Anything wrong in that?"

"No, but most of them will go home disappointed."

"And yourself?"

"Me? I came for a rest, remember?"

"Oh, yes. Then I don't suppose you're permitted to drink?"

"A glass or two wouldn't bother

me," he admitted encouragingly.

"Could we have one out here?"

"Of course." A drink would be just the thing. A white-jacketed boy brought them, bowed and walked away. Water splashed into the pool from the mouths of three green nymphs, a murmuring came from the dining room; otherwise, there was no sound.

"No music this evening," Roger observed. "Something big going on elsewhere?"

"Nothing unusual. Gambling at the Casino, a dance at the Royal Palm. Do you gamble, Mr. Peters?"

"Not even for fun, and I don't particularly care for nightclubs."

"You'll be lonely this evening."

He caught the suggestion and looked directly at her. "You're going dancing—without an escort?"

"Would you care to take me?"

Miss Boyd smiled, and he realized he'd walked into a trap, but what difference?

"Glad to take you," he said.

The night blackened and grew cooler, the pool lay quiet. Roger emptied his glass, glanced toward the dining room. Empty and dark; a single small light burning at the bar and no one there. The guests had fled, the hotel was deserted. He arose on unsteady legs, went to the railing, looked down. The hill below dropped swiftly away, thin

trees raised dark hands toward him; the jungle below. Chilled, he turned away, for down there was the real island with its hidden terrors and violence which the tourists never saw. Now he wondered about himself. Why had he accepted Miss Boyd's proposal? Would she be like the others? He resented the thought, for it cheapened her and, by the same token, made her available.

Three potent rum cocktails in him and he felt a little reckless. But where was she? A half-hour gone since she went to dress. He entered the hotel and asked at the desk for her room number. The clerk obliged and sent him a sly smile. They must smell it, Roger thought.

A series of dim passages brought him to Miss Boyd's room—but was it hers? He struck a match. Number seven on the door. He knocked, heels clicked on tile, the door opened and she stood before him.

"I'm almost ready. Coming in?"

The invitation unexpected, he hesitated, stepped in.

"Sorry I took so long, Roger, but those drinks we had . . . I had to lie down." She smiled, a different person from the one at the pool, eyes softer, body relaxed. "It's so quiet. I don't hear anyone."

"I doubt if any guests are about,"

he said, and eyed the room. "Big," he commented.

"And so isolated."

"A hard time finding it."

"But you did."

"Had to," he said, and she stepped close, her arms encircled his neck, her mouth found his. Stunned, he couldn't move at first and, when he did, it was too late. She escaped and ran to the bathroom. Out again, she donned a white shawl, walked toward him, pressed her room key into his hand, saying, "We'll need this later."

A single taxi waited under the carport. The driver assisted them in. A rumbling over cobblestones, wide turn on a descending curve and the car leaped forward into the dark. Roger felt he was moving through a void. Anything can happen, he thought, feeling the key in his hand and recalling the start of the evening, Miss Boyd descending the steps to the pool, the casual introduction by Mr. LaFarge.

Simple and ordinary . . . but was it? He slipped the key into his pocket. Later, after the necessary rituals of the dancing and drinking, he'd have use for it. Nothing else remained between the formalities and the cool sheets of Miss Boyd's bed. Is she like the others? He wondered, and she spoke.

"You're not saying anything.

What's wrong?" she asked him.

"I don't like this road in the dark."

"The drivers know it with their eyes shut." She took his hand. A sharp curve and she was thrown against him. There was an odor of rum on her.

"Those drinks were stronger than I thought," he remarked. "Smell the rum?"

"A bottle in my bathroom—I



had a quick drink before we left."

Strange. Earlier, she'd complained about the cocktails. But what matter? The car rushed on.

Twenty minutes later it stopped in front of the Royal Palm. The nightclub was dimly lit, crowded, the native band playing a Meringue. A waiter found them a table. The band paused, took up with another Meringue and Miss Boyd arose. "Shall we?"

"Why not?" He escorted her to the floor. Dance? She pressed too close, used her body a bit too much.

Back at their table she emptied her drink in a swallow, and he looked around. An excess of men, some tables occupied solely by them, natives, each with the look of a hungry predator. They drank and watched the women who sat out the dances. Sometimes they got up and approached them. None came to Roger's table, but they watched, one in particular.

Roger noticed him, Miss Boyd didn't; the drinks reaching her? He saw it in her eyes, felt it in the way she clung to him and used her body while they danced. She was beginning to draw attention. At the announcement of the floor show, he felt relieved. At least he didn't have to dance the Meringue for a while. He mentioned that.

"It's the craze here," Miss Boyd countered.

"Yes, like dope. Let yourself go with it and you can't stop."

She lifted her glass. "Isn't that why we came, to let ourselves go?"

How far? he wanted to say, and a loud drumming intervened. Out went the lights, silence; a white beam knifed across the dance floor, focused on an all but naked female. A slow rhythmic beat of bongos and she began to writhe.

Conversation died. The dancer held all eyes till she finished. Applause followed, a group took the floor, waiters moved among the tables. Ice clinked in glasses. Roger had already lost count of the drinks he'd had. The waiter brought new glasses. Warn Miss Boyd to be careful? A bit late; her eyes were already glazed.

The near naked female dancer again in solo, the rhythm of the bongos wilder, dancer's movements more suggestive. A burst of applause greeted her as she finished. The lights went on, the band began another Meringue.

Miss Boyd jumped up, ready to dance. Roger hesitated. As the tall man at the other table stared, he led Miss Boyd to the floor. She held him tightly, head bobbing loosely, hips everywhere; her dress slipped from her shoulders and she refused to adjust it.

Three successive dances, back to the table and the tall man appeared, bowed, smiled at Roger. "Do you mind?" Quickly he turned to Miss Boyd and asked for a dance. Smiling, she rose unsteadily and was taken by the arm.

Roger watched them on the floor, finally lost them in the crowd. They returned when the music stopped. The tall man bowed, left, and Miss Boyd flopped into her chair. "He's a marvelous dancer,"

she said. "Did you at all notice?"

"I did, but take care, he's had his eye on you all evening."

"Anything wrong in that?"

"Not if he just looks."

"Jealous, or just being stuffy?"

"Neither, but I brought you here, I feel responsible."

"Oh, come on. What can happen on a dance floor?"

"Nothing, I suppose, but just be careful. He'll be back for more."

"You don't want me to dance with him?"

"I can't stop you," he said.

Later, the tall one appeared at their table again. A bow, a smile, and off he swept Miss Boyd to the far side of the floor. His strategy? Roger lifted his glass. The drink was as mild as water. Was the waiter cheating, thinking he was drunk? Still, his lips were completely numb, a looseness had invaded his body and he felt ready to do something reckless.

A bottle crashed and he turned, saw a stout middle-aged woman being helped from the floor by a man half her age. Maudlin drunk, she tried to kiss him. He held her off, gave her a familiar pat, filled her glass.

Roger turned away. A sudden change was taking place, the music louder, wilder, dancers less restrained. The almost stilted, formalized steps of the Meringue no

longer held the women. Their hips were freer now as they abandoned themselves to the music.

Some minutes later the tall man returned to his table and tossed off a drink. Where was Miss Boyd? Gone to the powder room? Roger waited, finally got up and went to the other table. The tall one arose, bowed stiffly from the hips. "Miss Boyd? Another gentleman asked her to dance."

Roger turned away, searched for her, and went back to the table where the tall man sat with his friends. He looked up and smiled. "Ah, back again. You didn't find your partner? Too bad."

"What happened to her?"

"Who knows? Perhaps she went off with the other gentleman."

There was no point in continuing. The tall one lit up, his friends grinned. Appeal to them? Roger turned away, again searched the huge room and found the waiter who'd served him. He knew nothing. Perhaps the manager could help. That one shrugged. "The lady must have decided to leave."

"She didn't leave on her own. Something happened to her."

"Here? Impossible. Perhaps—"

"There's no sense discussing it with you people. Where do I find the police?"

"It'll do you no good to go to them. The Captain won't be at

headquarters, I can assure you."

"He's the whole force?"

"No, but his subordinates would only refer the matter to him in the morning—if he appears."

"If he appears?"

"Yes. You see, he's not always there."

"Then where can I reach him?"

A shrug and Roger went out the door. The taxi driver who'd brought them stepped up: "Ready to go back to the hotel, sir?"

"No. Something happened to the young lady I brought here. Take me to police headquarters."

"I wouldn't advise that, sir."

"I'm not asking for advice."

"As you wish, but the Captain—"

"Won't be there till morning? Okay, the hotel."

The driver started the car. It was late now. No light shone, nothing stirred. Roger sat back. "What happens when a crime is committed on the island?" he asked.

"Sir?"

"Suppose someone is murdered, kidnapped, raped? Must you wait till morning for something to be done about it?"

The driver glanced back and grinned. "There are no kidnappings here. Rape?" He shook his head. "One doesn't have to use force where love comes so easy. Ah, but in your country it's different, I understand. As for murder, occasion-

ally a man may kill another over a woman."

"And the Captain comes around in the morning to clear up the matter?"

The driver ignored the remark. "As a matter of fact, we have very little crime, no gangsters, nothing like you have back in the States."

End of theme; silence reigned till they reached the hotel. "If you're going into the city in the morning, sir . . ."

No answer for him. Roger went up the steps, entered the hotel. A sleepy-eyed clerk lounged behind the desk. Ask him if Miss Boyd had returned? No. He went to her room, opened the door, flicked the light. A hollow room.

Light slipped through the blinds, laughter sounded below the balcony, the black night of the island gone. Roger went to Miss Boyd's room and knocked, then used the key. An empty room. He went off, found the manager and explained the events of the previous evening.

"You think something happened to Miss Boyd?" The manager looked at his nails. "Most likely she went off with someone for the evening and slept over. After all, that's been known to happen here."

"No doubt, but that's not the answer."

"You might wait and see if she

turns up. It's early yet," he placated.

"I've waited long enough."

"In that case, you'll want to see the police, but please sit down. Unfortunately, the Captain sleeps late. He may not be up before noon."

"No one else can do anything?"

"I'm afraid not. Coffee, Mr. Peters?"

An hour later Roger drove away from the hotel. The sun blazed, the road stayed empty all the way into town. The taxi stopped in front of police headquarters. He went inside. The Captain? Not in yet. When would he arrive? Later.

The sum of later, noon—and the Captain? One and the same as the tall man of the previous evening. "Yes, what can I do for you?" he grinned.

"It's about—"

"The young lady you were looking for last evening. You didn't find her?"

"You know damned well—"

The grin faded, the Captain's hand came up. "Enough of that. You were drinking last night, and I made allowances. Now you're sober, and I have a headache."

Heed the warning? The hell with him. "Where's Miss Boyd? You don't frighten me."

"Perhaps not. So you want the young lady? Too bad. She left the island."

"There was no plane out of here

last night, as you very well know."

"She left this morning. A little trouble with a gentleman she danced with last night. Too much to drink, so she was detained."

"Where?"

"In our jail, of course."

"For what reason? You haven't made that clear enough."

"I've made it as clear as I intend to, and now if you will please leave . . . When you have the facts? Ah, perhaps you'd like to try our jail? I can hold you on several charges, and it would be most difficult for you to do anything about it. A month or so in a dirty cell . . ."

A bluff? No. He left, climbed into the taxi and it moved off.

"The young lady's safe?" the driver asked.

"She's supposed to have left on the morning plane."

"That's right. I drove her to the airport this morning."

"How could you? She wasn't at the hotel, she was in jail."

"Jail? Oh, no. She spent the night at the Captain's house. You see, it's always the same. Someone takes his fancy, she's arrested, held overnight and—"

"Put on the plane in the morning," Roger said. Reaching into his pocket then, he found Miss Boyd's key and flung it out the window.

A holiday is at its best for a certain portly gentleman when he finds he is yet able to spread good cheer—with exceptions.

Chaviski's CHRISTMAS



JOE CHAVISKI, retired chief of detectives, sniffed the smoke and disinfectant that permeated the grim, gray atmosphere of the Fort Sanders police station and city jail. It was so sweet to him that he filled his mighty lungs a second time. This was his youth again—this was living as he had known it for thirty years as a member of the force.

Detective Chief Marty Sauer, who was once one of his "boys," came into the station smoking a big, black cigar. "Joe, what are you doing down here on Christmas Eve? Last place I'd be tonight if I could get away."

"You can," Joe said. "That's the reason I came down—so one or more of you boys could take off and be with your wife and kids."

Sauer stuck out his hand. "Wish

I could take you up on that, Joe."
"Go on home, Marty. I'll take over," Chaviski offered.

Sauer didn't go. Instead, he went over to a bench and picked up the afternoon paper.

Detective Johnnie Hopp came in. "Well I'll be—Joe Chaviskil Merry Christmas, Joe. I thought you'd be home popping corn, or maybe out of town visiting relatives."

"Have a cigar, Johnnie," Joe said, pulling a long, black one from his pocket.

"Is this a Fidel special?" Hopp asked. "Won't explode on me, now, Joe?"

"What do you rummies think I am? This ain't April Fool. You think I'd give you an exploding cigar at Christmas?"

"Well, no—not at Christmas." Hopp lighted up. He took a couple of puffs and then held the cigar at arm's length. It didn't explode. "Gee, thanks, Joe," he said.

"Of all the uncouth, ungrateful, ignoramuses," Joe stormed, glaring with his old fervor, "you're the worst! Don't you respect a friend's gift?"

"Sorry, Joe. I really am. This is a darn good cigar."

"I came down here thinking I could take over somebody's run for an hour or so, let the boys take turns going home to be with their

kids on Christmas Eve. All I get is insults."

"Chief's got a schedule worked out," Hopp said. "I get off at eight-thirty and go home for an hour. All the boys get off sometime tonight. Day shift's coming back to help out."

"Okay, okay," Joe said. "Don't mention it. I come down here to be good to some guy. Might as well go on back home and listen to the Christmas carols. That's all there is on television. I'll be glad when Christmas is over."

Joe didn't go home. It was the last place he wanted to be tonight. It was so barren and empty—his wife Lucy had been dead seven years now. Christmas had meant so much to Lucy. They had never had children, so she'd take a dozen or more youngsters from the orphanage into their home for a real Christmas. Joe had always groaned when the bills came in, but the happiness that Lucy had given the children was worth it. Of course it was always his lot to work on Christmas Eve, but like all the boys he had got off duty for an hour, and Lucy had him play Santa Claus and distribute the gifts. He'd change into a Santa Claus suit in the garage—and with his 250 pounds it needed no padding.

Now Joe's home rang with emp-

tininess instead of the happy laughter of little children. He hadn't put up any Christmas decorations, and the packages he had received earlier in the week from Charlie Taylor, his nephew in St. Louis, and from Emma Howard, his niece in Memphis, still lay unopened on the livingroom table. Joe had mailed out his presents ten days ago and had posted his Christmas cards the week before. He had also mailed a sizeable contribution for presents at the orphan's home. Now, on Christmas Eve, he had wandered down to the police station to grouch and cuss and joke with the boys—to be with other humans on the most terrible night of the year for a retired and lonely man.

Desk Sergeant Jack Haley had a fruitcake wrapped in foil on his desk, beside a big electric percolator. "Help yourself, Joe," he said. Joe cut a piece of cake and filled a paper cup with hot, black coffee. "Cream and sugar over there," Haley said.

"No, thanks, I like it black."

Motor Patrolmen Pete Rauser and Charlie Henryetta came in with a drunk. They booked him, searched him, turned his billfold, watch, and pocketknife over to Haley, who also served as night jailer, and then put him in the run-around. "Go to sleep," said Rauser, "and sober up."

Henryetta cracked a pecan and began eating it. Rauser went to the telephone and dialed his wife. "How are the kids? Tell them I'll be home in a little while—oh about half an hour. Fix me some eggnog."

Night Chief Merle Henson came in. "Hello, Joe. Glad to see you."

"I came down thinking I might take over for someone, let one of the boys go home to his family."

Henson nodded. "Thanks Joe. Appreciate it. But we got a schedule all worked out."

"Hell of a thing about that three-year-old being kidnapped over at Tulsa last night," said Marty Sauer, putting down the paper. "We watched the bridge all last night. Stopped every car coming from Oklahoma. He either had already got through or headed somewhere else out of Sallisaw."

"Anything new on it?" Joe asked.

"No, nothing," Chief Henson said, "except we got a picture of the kid, special delivery, about thirty minutes ago from the Tulsa police department. Posted on the bulletin board."

Joe swore. Kidnapping—at Christmas! He waddled over to the bulletin board and looked at the poster hurriedly prepared by the Tulsa police. A dark-haired tot, wearing a cowboy suit and a

brace of toy six-shooters almost as big as he was, looked back at Joe from the poster. The child's name was Jimmy Wells.

His father, the bulletin stated, was a Tulsa oil man. The parents were separated. It had been a spectacular kidnapping. The father had sent his chauffeur for the boy around ten a.m. the day before, and he was to spend the rest of the day and night with the father, and be returned to his mother the next day—Christmas Eve.

Two hours later the body of Wells' chauffeur had been found in a Tulsa city park.

Three hours after that, Sequoyah County officers had come upon the abandoned Wells car on U.S. 64, just west of Sallisaw, Oklahoma. A crudely scrawled note demanding \$100,000 ransom had been pinned to the front seat of the car. The note threatened death to the child if the police were informed—silly, because it was almost certain that officers would either find the car or be notified the moment someone else found it. Sallisaw was about twenty miles west of Fort Sanders on the Arkansas-Oklahoma state line, but the kidnapers could have gone in any direction from there.

Joe scrutinized the bulletins and posters on other criminals—killers, safecrackers, forgers, extortionists,

and escaped convicts wanted by the FBI and police departments throughout the Southwest—but always his eyes came back to the three-year-old boy who was in the hands of a killer-kidnapper.

A couple more drunks were brought in; one was wild, cursing and screaming. There was an accident far out on the old Greenwood Road. Far out! Joe was living out there twenty years ago. Old Greenwood Road was now paved and in a heavily populated part of the city. The city limits had pushed much farther south.

Joe found the station filling with trim young men in snappy police uniforms, shining boots and shoes, gleaming helmets, badges, belt-buckles, and efficient looking guns. It was eight-thirty. Some of the boys were leaving for their homes. The others had come in to relieve them.

Marty Sauer winked. "Come on, Joe, let's go out and cruise around and maybe get a cup of coffee. Johnnie Hopp's mother and sister got in tonight and they're leaving again tomorrow. He won't have much time to see them so I sent him home whether Chief likes it or not. I knew you'd be glad to ride with me."

"That's what I came for," Joe said.

"Got your gun?"

"Sure. I always carry my gun."

This was more like it! This was living again for Joe. They cruised Main Street. Shopping was almost over. Some of the stores already had closed, but a few were still open and last-minute, wild-eyed shoppers were rushing here and there. Salvation Army lads and lassies shivered as they kept the Christmas pots boiling beneath their tripods, hoping to pick up a few belated coins to help pay for tomorrow's Christmas dinners for the poor and homeless. Icy winds whipped around street corners and sent the strings of decorative lights to dancing. Night fog swept in from the river accompanied by gusts of sleet. Weary salesclerks looked at the clocks on the walls of their stores, wanting to get home to be with their own families—and the spirit of Christmas took over the Holy Night.

They cruised the length of the avenue, turned back and went up a side street. Everything seemed in order. One or two drunks were weaving along the sidewalks in the west part of town, but Sauer paid no attention to them. Ordinarily, Joe knew, Sauer very likely would have stopped and picked them up. A swaying drunk, crossing a street at night, was a traffic menace. He might be killed or hurt, or cause someone else to be hurt trying to

avoid hitting him. But tonight, Christmas Eve, Sauer wasn't seeing them. Traffic was thinning down. Maybe they would stay on the sidewalk and safely get to wherever they were going.

They drove across the river bridge into Oklahoma, turned around under the overpass, and came back over the bridge. The Christmas decorations over the avenue were beautiful. How many, many Christmas Eves had he spent just like this when he was on the force—cruising the streets of the city, looking for prowlers—and before that, in his rookie days as a patrolman, walking his beat, trying the back doors of business houses for break-ins, checking the restaurants, the honky-tonks, the railroad and bus stations.

Now Marty and Joe cruised the alleys behind the big wholesale buildings in the west end of town, their eyes and flashlights covering every window, every back door. Joe's big paw settled on Marty's wrist. "Over there. The steps at the end of the warehouse loading dock. I saw something move."

Sauer shot the car toward the dock, turning the headlights on upper beam. A dark shadow parted from the side of the steps and scurried into the darkness beneath the dock. Joe leaped out of the cruiser on one side and Sauer on

the other, their handguns drawn. "Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" The crackling voice of an old man came to them from beneath the dock.

"Come out from under there with your hands up!" Sauer commanded.

"Okay, don't shoot," the old man whined. A thin, grizzled, and dirty man of about seventy crawled out of the shadows.

"Well, hello there!" Sauer said. "It's Fisherman Frankie. Frankie, what the devil are you up to?"

"Ain't up to nothin'," said the old man. "On my way to my houseboat to play Santa for my grandson."

"Yeah? Why did you duck under that dock?"

"Well, sir, Mister Sauer, I guess it was jest habit. A feller up the street give me a couple of swigs of good whiskey, it bein' Christmas—and me, when I been drinkin' and I see a cop comin', I jest natchelly run and hide, and that's the truth."

Sauer's flashlight was merciless, revealing a seamed and wrinkled old face, red from the biting wind—but the old eyes squinting out from beneath straggly white hair and a craggy thrust of forehead were keen as a knife blade—and calculating.

"I'll hold him," Joe said. "You

better take a look behind those steps."

"Why, Mister Joe Chaviski," Frankie said. "I ain't seen you in a coon's age. Got me a sack of stuff the Salvation Army give me under there, that's all."

"Uh huh," said Joe. "We'll see."

Old Frankie was a petty thief, a river rat. He made the legitimate part of his living as a professional fisherman on the river—if you forgot the fact that he never bought a professional license, or any fishing license at all, in his whole life. The rest of the time he lived either by what he could "pick up" or off the city while sitting out jail sentences. It had been like this when Joe Chaviski was on his first beat on the force—and it would be like that until Frankie was too old to get about.

Marty Sauer came out from under the dock with a tow sack loaded with packages. "Salvation Army is getting highfalutin' these days to giftwrap all its stuff for charity," he said. "Don't you think so, Joe?"

"Not all of it come from the Salvation Army," Frankie said. "I got a lot of friends give me things at Christmas."

Sauer motioned to the car. "Okay, get in the back seat, Frankie. We're going riding."

The old fellow got in the car

protesting. "I got a grandson visitin'. He's just a little mite of a feller. I tole him Santa would bring him some things tonight. Now what is he goin' to think?"

"He's not alone down there, is he?"

"Nope. The ole woman's with him. But he's going to be mighty disappointed. He'll think his grandpappy plumb lied to him. He won't never trust no Santa no more."

At the station they unloaded Frankie's sack upon the top of Haley's desk. There was a silk dress from one of the leading department stores, a toy bulldozer, a box of chocolates and a box of hard candy, a football, a can of mixed nuts, a water pistol, a popgun, a near child-size doll, and a toy airplane. There was a necklace of imitation pearls and a matching set of earrings, a set of doll dishes, an electric alarm clock, a Boy Scout knife, and two boxes of 12-gauge shotgun shells. Most of the items were gift-wrapped, and they came from different stores.

"Frankie, Frankie," Joe said, "you and I have got along all these years. Why did you have to go and make us put you in jail on Christmas Eve?"

"You think I stole those things?"

"We know darn well you did," Joe said. "Now what is that *other*

little boy going to do, who was expecting that football you got here, and that popgun, and that toy bulldozer? What's the lady going to do when she finds that dress missing—or that little girl when she doesn't get her baby doll in the morning? Frankie, I'm ashamed of you."

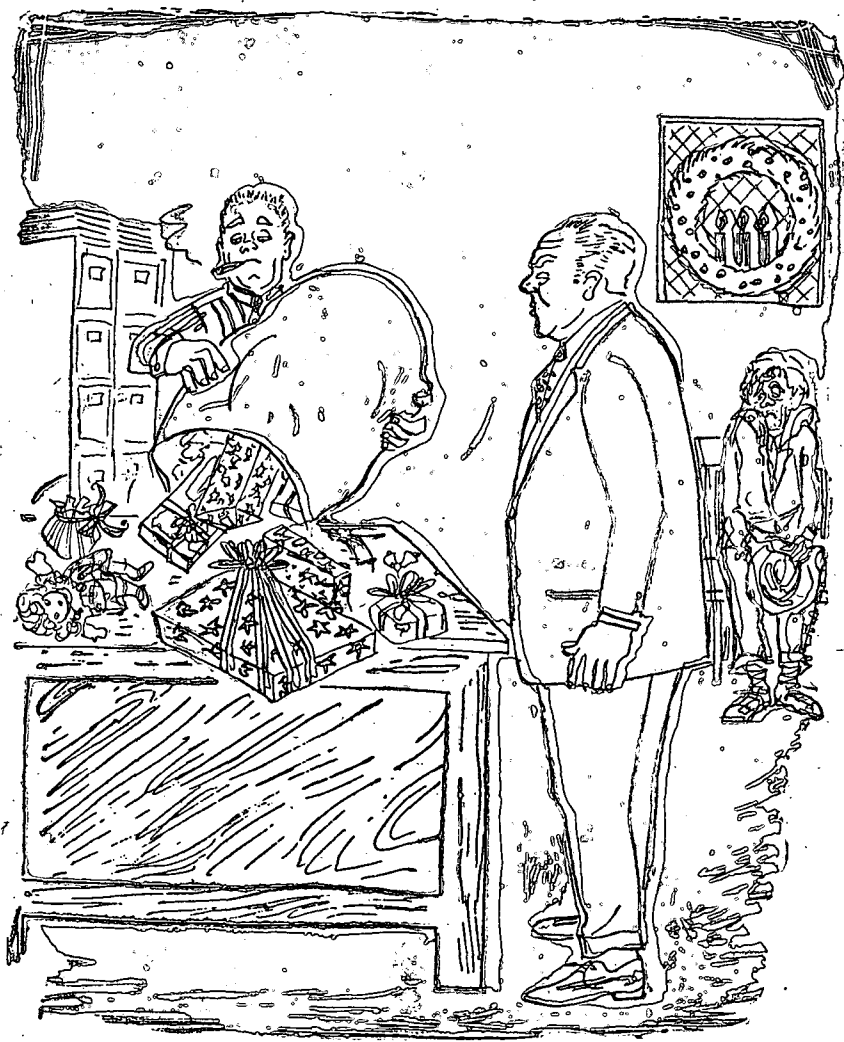
"I don't know what you're talking about, Mister Joe. That dress was give to me fer my wife. I got some friends in this here town, I have. And them toys was for my little grandson. My boy Jed brought him along from Californie. Jed don't get home very often."

Sauer handed Joe a paper which Haley had just given him. The list contained a number of items reported stolen from parked cars. "They've been phoned in during the last thirty minutes. Late shoppers. They left their cars unlocked as per usual."

Practically everything reported stolen from the cars now lay on the sergeant's desk.

"Lock him up," Sauer said. "Charge grand larceny."

"Mister Sauer," old Frankie whined, "have a heart. First time I ever seen my grandson. What'll he think of me? All I got is two dollars. Won't some of you go buy him a leetle present of some kind? I hate to let that li'l feller down.



Me an' the ole woman don't want nothin' fer Christmas. I didn't pick up that stuff fer us. I just grabbed what I could, hopin' to get something for the boy."

"Where is the boy?" Joe inquired.

"Down in my houseboat. You know the place where the old wharf used to be years ago, jest above the ole railroad bridge."

Joe nodded. "Marty and I'll try to pick up some toys somewhere for him. Don't know where—everything's closed by now. But we'll find him some toys somewhere."

Old Frankie held out his hand—a gnarled old hand as hard as a stick of oak. "Thank you, Joe. I don't give a damn what happens to me, just so that leetle boy gets somethin' fer Christmas. His daddy had to leave just as soon as he dropped him off last night. He'll be back tomorrow, or the day after, but I don't know whether he'll bring the kid anything or not."

Joe and Sauer consulted with Night Chief Henson, and then passed the word over the police radio that a little boy wasn't going to have much of a Christmas because his grandfather was locked up in jail—where he was liable to be for some time. The police were asked to "kick in" with a small and suitable gift from the toys they had bought for their own children.

The appeal couldn't have done better if it had been person-to-person to Santa Claus himself. One by one the boys began appearing at the station with a toy—a teddy bear, a box of blocks, a little mechanical duck, a tiny train, a pop-gun, and on and on. For good measure, the police wives donated candy, fruit, cookies, and articles of

clothing. Joe grinned with pleasure.

Chief Henson surveyed the pile of gifts on Marty Sauer's desk. "Okay," he said, "who's going to play Santa Claus? You ought to do it, Marty—you and Joe. I know Joe will go along."

"Wait a minute," Joe said, "look at the time. It's ten-thirty. That little boy has been asleep for hours. We can't go down there and wake him up this time of night."

"That's right, Joe," the chief said. "But somebody ought to go down there and tell Frankie's old lady where he is. She might be missing him—it being Christmas and him not getting back with anything."

Some of the boys chuckled. "I'll go tell her," Sauer said. "You want to come along, Joe?"

They drove down to the end of the pavement on Parker Avenue and got out of the car. Old Frankie's houseboat was anchored down at the foot of the natural wharf, a hundred feet or so above the old Missouri Pacific bridge. The dirt road that led down to the wharf was muddy from recent rains, and a car was liable to bog down. Joe and Sauer made their way slowly down to the boat, walking carefully over the sleet-covered slate walk which was part of the old wharf. Frankie's boat was tied up to iron rings hammered into crevices of the rock. There was no light on in

the boat, and a single twelve-inch plank led from the slate rock to the boat—a crude and slippery gang-plank.

"Hello there in the boat, Mrs. Frankie," Sauer shouted. After the third call, there was a spurt of yellow light inside, and a moment later a gaunt, gray-haired old woman appeared in the door. She was wearing a long, flannel nightgown and was holding a lighted lantern.

"Who is it?"

"Detective Sauer of the police department—and Joe Chaviski," Sauer said. "Frankie ran into a little trouble. We've got him up there in jail."

"What fer?"

"Going through cars."

The old woman remained silent.

"We thought you might be uneasy when he didn't get back to-night."

"I shore thank ye for letting me know."

"You've got your little grandson on the boat, haven't you?" Joe said.

"I shore have. Cutest little feller you ever seen. He's sound asleep."

"The police department heard about it, and we want to bring down some presents for him in the morning."

"That shore would be nice."

"What time do you think the boy will be awake?"

"'Bout eight o'clock, I reckon."

"Good," said Joe. "We'll be back in the morning."

"Okay," said the old woman. "I'll have some fresh coffee bilin'."

"Fresh coffee, Joe," Sauer said, when they had climbed back up the muddy road to their car. "Where you reckon they get the water? From the river?"

"Well, it will be 'biled,'" Joe said. "I hope you fellows won't forget to get those things down to her in the morning like we promised."

"Where do you get that 'you fellows' stuff? That's your job. The whole idea was yours."

"The heck with you. This is the police department's party. I'm not having anything to do with it."

"Oh no? You be down here at eight o'clock in the morning to go with me," Sauer said. "And that's an order."

At the station Joe started for his car to go home.

"And say," Sauer said, "you still got that Santa Claus suit? Why don't you do it up right and wear it in the morning. Don't want to let that kid down just because his granddad got caught and had to go to jail."

Joe got in his car and gunned it out of the parking area. When he got home, he opened the packages his folks had sent him. The package from his nephew contained a

pair of gloves too small for his hands. The package from his niece contained a bright red tie. Joe never wore a red tie in his life. He carefully did the packages up again. He'd take them down to old Frankie's place in the morning and leave them there for the old scoundrel whenever he got out of jail. Maybe they'd reduce the charges to petty larceny.

Then, on an inspiration, Joe went to the clothes closet—it had been Lucy's closet—and fished one of Lucy's good dresses out of a moth-proof bag. The dress had been hanging there since the summer before Lucy went away. He folded the dress and gift-wrapped it, using some of the paper that had been left over from the presents he had sent the families of his niece and nephew. Lucy's dress was of good quality. Maybe it wasn't in the latest style, but poor old Mrs. Frankie wouldn't know the difference.

Joe turned in, but he couldn't quickly get to sleep. There was something troubling him, and he wasn't quite sure what it was.

He was up at six in the morning and cooked a Christmas breakfast of ham and eggs, toast, hot coffee, and a side dish of instant oatmeal. Then Joe rummaged at the bottom of an old trunk in his bedroom and drew out the Santa

Claus suit—the suit he had used when Lucy entertained the orphans years ago. Any grandson of Fisherman Frankie—and son of Jed Frankie—was bound to be underprivileged. Maybe Lucy was watching Joe approvingly now.

He pulled on the suit, and it was a tight fit. He pulled on the black boots, and even dug out the white whiskers, but he placed the whiskers in the front seat of his car. No need of putting them on until the last minute—the darn things had always tickled. It was a quarter of eight when he strode into the police station.

He was greeted by a chorus of "Ho, ho, ho's!" delivered in unison by the boys who were there.

"Where the devil is Sauer?" he asked Pète Scoville, day desk sergeant.

"Why, Joe, he works at night. He might be down later, though."

"You wait until I get my hands on him!" Joe roared. "Well, some of you fellows got to go with me to old Frankie's place. I'm not taking this thing on all by myself."

The report of a safecracking at a supermarket came in, quickly followed by automobile accidents in widely separated parts of town. The station was cleared of policemen in a jiffy.

Sergeant Scoville looked at Joe and shrugged. "Looks like you're

a solitary Santa Claus," he said. "All right. Where's that darn tow sack Frankie had his stuff in last night?"

The sergeant found it and helped him load everything into it that the boys had donated for the Frankie kid's Christmas. Joe was shouldering the pack when Scoville handed him a cigar wrapped in a Christmas card. There was a note in the card: "Merry Christmas, Santa Joe. See you later. I'm sleeping. P.S. Have this cigar on me. Marty."

Swearing to himself, Joe lugged the sack out to the car. It was like old times. He lit Marty's cigar. It exploded! Joe shook his fist at Scoville, who was watching from the door of the police station.

He drove to the end of the pavement above the old wharf and parked the car. He put on the ticklish Santa Claus whiskers, hefted the sack of presents to his back, carried the package containing Lucy's dress under his arm, and started the descent to the houseboat. Last night's freeze had put a crust on the surface of the muddy wharf road, but the last fifty feet over the slate rock was slippery with ice.

Joe reached the plank that led from the rocks to the boat and halloed until Mrs. Frankie opened the door. She was wearing a faded

Mother Hubbard this morning, and she had combed her hair and done it up in a bun. "Morning, Mister Chaviski," she said. "Coffee's ready. Watch yore step on that plank. It's plumb icy."

Joe minced across the plank like a great cat trying to avoid getting its feet wet. A small child was seated at a table inside the houseboat, but until Joe's eyes adjusted all he could make out was the outline of the tot's head. "I want my mommy," said a little voice.

Joe "Ho-ho-ho'd" in his best Santa Claus voice and began putting the toys on the table before the boy, drawing the presents out of the sack one by one. He handed the package containing Lucy's dress to Mrs. Frankie. "A present from my wife," he said.

"Thankee," said the old lady. "That was real thoughty of her."

"I want my mommy," wailed the little fellow. He had been spooning something that looked like oatmeal and milk out of a bowl. Great tears ran down the child's face.

"My boy Jed brung little Junior here so his wife couldn't get her hands on him," Mrs. Frankie said. "They've split up, and he had to hide the boy away from her lawyers. Jed'll be here any time now. He said he'd be back early Christmas morning and maybe take the boy away ag'in."

Joe selected a cuddly teddy bear from the pile of gifts and pushed it toward the youngster. The child stopped crying and grabbed the toy with a gurgle of delight.

"Lor'-a-mercy!" said the old woman. "I wish my poor man was here. I never seed so many perties in my life. None of my kids ever had more than one toy, and I brung up eight of them. Quite a job, too, when we was livin' on the river all the time."

Joe looked at the youngster, now over his timidity and diving into the other toys on the table. Eight little ones brought up in a one-room box on the water like this! There were two cots, a bare table, and two chairs, one with the back broken off. Heat was furnished by a wood-burning range at the far end of the cabin. Wall decorations consisted of smelly fish nets and coils of trot-line cord. Stored beneath the table was a sack of welfare commodities and a Christmas box of groceries from the Salvation Army.

Mrs. Frankie shrieked with delight. She had opened Joe's package, and held the dress at arm's length admiring it, then ran her hand lovingly across the front, patting it fondly. "Tell your old lady—tell Mrs. Chaviski it's the only silk dress I ever had in my life," she said. Joe wished Lucy could

have heard her say it in person.

Joe got up to leave, but she insisted he have some coffee. She poured it into a tin cup and he drank it down without a qualm about germs and water pollution. The coffee was so hot and strong he knew no germ could survive.

Joe picked up the child and held him in his arms. "Daddy, Daddy," the tot crooned. "Take me mommy."

"I'll do that, sonny," he said. "I'll do that very thing. Daddy will come see you right away. You be a good boy till Daddy comes."

"Mr. Chaviski, my mister always said you was a good cop. I wish you'd do what you could to get him out of jail. It's tough on a ole woman like me trying to get along without no man. Them Salvation Army vittles is all the food we'uns have got."

"I'll do what I can," Joe said. "Maybe we can get the charge reduced to petty larceny." He picked up the package containing the red tie and the one with the gloves. "These are gifts for Frankie. I'll take them to him in the jail."

Joe made his way carefully back to the car, drove it about a block and parked behind some shrubbery. He had brought the tow sack back to the car with him, and now he took the mats from the floor of his car and stuffed them into the

sack. He lowered the windows an inch or two on each side of the car to let the fresh air in and started the heater. It might be a long wait, and it was still plenty cold at a little past nine o'clock.

He had an idea that Jed would be coming, just like his mother had said, and that he would come across the old railroad bridge. That bridge had been built before Jed Frankie's father had been born. Jed and his brothers and sisters had played in the shadow of that bridge all their lives—and the only bath water they had ever known was the muddy Arkansas River water that swirled about its base.

Thirty minutes Joe waited. The Santa Claus suit, tight and uncomfortable as it was, helped keep him warm. He did not remove the whiskers. He even forgot they tickled. Darn it—if he just had some vanilla ice cream—just a pint carton of it. But he dared not drive off to get some. Across the river at the end of the old railroad bridge, a car could park in the cottonwood saplings and never be detected from the highway. Jed knew both sides of the river along the Arkansas-Oklahoma border like the back of his hand.

Another thirty minutes passed, and then he saw the dark figure on the bridge halfway across. It was Jed all right. He was tall and

lean like his father, except he wasn't bent over like Fisherman Frankie. Jed stopped at the end of the bridge and appeared to melt into one of the big steel end girders. Joe could see his head turning slowly as he peered warily about.

Now he was coming on—and Joe was out of his car, with his bulging sack on his back. They met at the cut, where the dirt road led down to the natural wharf.

"Santa Claus!" Jed said. "What the devil are you doing down here in this part of town. Slumming?"

"Salvation Army," Joe said. "Got some stuff for Mr. and Mrs. Frankie in the houseboat down there. First time I ever called on folks in a houseboat." Joe was carrying the gift packages for old man Frankie in his hands, the gaily wrapped package with the gloves and the one with the red tie.

"Them's my folks," Jed said. "Old Santa Claus wouldn't have a present for a little boy like me? Say a bottle of bonded bourbon?"

"No, I'm afraid not," Joe said, "but here's a pair of gloves and a nice red tie."

Joe shoved the packages toward Jed and suddenly pressed them against his body. The black barrel of a .38 revolver, lashed to the glove package with a pretty red ribbon, jammed into Jed's flesh.

"It's all up, Jed," Joe said. He

took two guns off the astonished Frankie.

At the police station a harassed Detective Chief Marty Sauer nearly dropped the telephone when he saw Joe Chaviski, bursting at the seams in a tight-fitting Santa Claus suit, herding a handcuffed Jed Frankie into the jail ahead of him, followed by Fisherman Frankie's wife lugging a black-haired little boy of three in her arms.

"He ain't no son of mine no more," old Mrs. Frankie was saying, emphasizing her declaration with choice oaths.

"What the devil you doing?" Marty Sauer said.

"I wanted you to go along with me, you hook-ruben," said Joe, "but no, you'd rather play with explosive cigars." He nodded to the jailer, then when the barred door opened, pushed Jed Frankie through and slammed the door shut after him. "You're not going anywhere, Frankie, so sit over there. We'll book you and take the cuffs off in a minute or two."

Chaviski sat down in Sauer's chair, reached for the telephone,

and placed a collect call to the Tulsa police department.

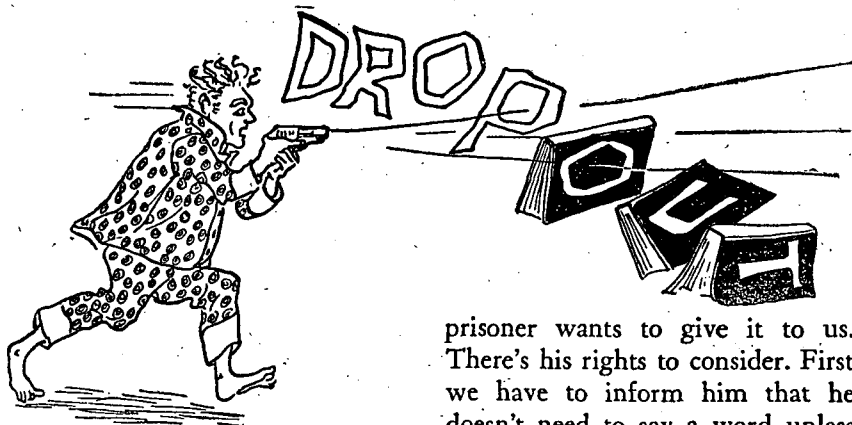
"Chaviski, Fort Sanders police. Hello, Captain, Merry Christmas to you. You got a young oilman over there and a young mother you think a three-year-old boy might possibly bring together again? Sure we got him. You didn't pay out the \$100,000 ransom, did you? Sure, we got the kidnaper too. What am I doing back on the force? Oh, when they got something tough they can't figure out, they call in the old man. Three hours? You make your boys watch out for slick spots on the highway and bring the mother and father both. I promised the kid they'd be here. Okay, Captain. Need anything else, don't fool with the police department over here—just call Joe Chaviski."

Marty Sauer bent down beside Chaviski, pulled out one of the drawers of the desk. There was a box of cigars, and there was a card on it: "To Joe Chaviski from the boys at the Police Department."

"And not a darn one of them is going to explode," Sauer said.



Unerring decisions are the muscular training of a philosopher, Epictetus believed, and the following may be substantiation.



SHERIFF TATE introduced himself and then apologized. "Sorry to disturb you so early in the morning, Mr. Watkins, but we need a lawyer."

I opened my hotel room door a bit more. "We?"

"The Sheriff's Department," he said. "We've got this prisoner and he wants to confess."

I glanced at my watch. It was seven a.m. "So let him confess."

Tate smiled tolerantly. "We try to keep up with the times here, Mr. Watkins. We can't accept a confession anymore just because a

prisoner wants to give it to us. There's his rights to consider. First we have to inform him that he doesn't need to say a word unless he really feels like it. That's because of the Miranda Decision, you know. Then if he still insists on confessing, it's better for us if he does his talking in the presence of his lawyer. That's so he can't renege later and claim that nobody told him nothing. The whole thing is explained in the little booklet put out by the Sheriffs' Association."

"Now look, Sheriff," I said, "I have to attend my own business. One of my cases is scheduled before the State Supreme Court this afternoon and I've got to be there."

"This won't take more than a half hour of your time," Tate said.



By
JACK RITCHIE

"The Miranda Decision don't say how long you got to be his lawyer. I mean you just represent him while he does the confessing, and he can get another lawyer when his trial comes up."

I glanced at my packed suitcases. "Doesn't this town have any lawyers of its own?"

He nodded. "We got two, but they're both in Jefferson City this week. The County Court's in session, you know." He shifted his weight to the other foot. "This prisoner—Dawson is his name—was caught attempting to open the safe in Harrington's Superette."

I rubbed my jaw. "You were the one who caught him?"

"No. Harrington did that himself. He lives in the apartment over

the store. Heard a noise downstairs and came down with his pistol. Chased Dawson up the alley and wounded him. Nothing serious though; a scratch on the calf of his leg."

I gave that thought. "Have you arrested Harrington?"

Tate blinked. "Harrington? What for?"

"Surely a town of this size must have an ordinance against the discharge of firearms within its territorial limits?"

"Well, yes. But Harrington was just defending his property."

I smiled thinly. "And just where did you say that the prisoner was wounded?"

"The calf of the leg."

"In other words, the prisoner was running away from Harrington when he was shot?"

"I guess you could say that."

"So Harrington wasn't really defending anything, now was he? He was merely shooting a fleeing man in the back of the leg?"

Tate regarded me uncertainly for a moment, but then decided he still wanted me. "Anyway, we found this bag of safecracking tools in a back yard just off the alley. That's where Dawson threw them when he realized that they were slowing him down."

"You found Dawson's fingerprints on the tools?"

"Well, no. I guess he used the black gloves we found stuffed in his back pocket. According to the hotel people, Dawson's been here two days and passing himself off as a wholesale shoe salesman."

My eyes went to the window. The day had possibilities of being depressing. "Where is the prisoner now?"

"In a cell at the jailhouse."

"You put a wounded man in a jail cell?"

"Well, sure. Like I said, the wound wasn't nothing serious. Just nicked off a little flesh."

"Is that what the doctor said?"

"We couldn't get Doc Peterson. He was out on a country call. Mrs. Thomkins is expecting again and she believes in home deliveries. But we got this first-aid box in the office."

I shook my head sadly.

Tate looked worried. "You think we should've got the doctor somehow? But the Miranda Decision don't cover slight flesh wounds."

"Why is the prisoner so eager to confess?"

"Not eager, exactly. It's just that he's been thinking it over for a few hours and I guess he realizes that since he was caught in the act it'll go easier for him if he makes no trouble and confesses."

"You made a deal with him?"

"Absolutely not," Tate said firm-

ly. "No deals. I'll swear to that."

I accompanied Tate to the jailhouse and was introduced to Harrington.

He was a heavy man with the faint smell of liquor about him. "I live over the store," he said, "and along about three this morning I woke and heard this noise downstairs. So I went to the dresser where I keep my pistol and pulled out the drawer. I guess I must have been a little nervous, because I pulled it out too far and everything fell to the floor. That must have let the safecracker know I was coming. By the time I made it downstairs, he was already in the alley."

"How much did he steal?" I asked.

"Nothing," Harrington said. "He didn't have time to get the safe open."

Tate's deputy brought the prisoner into the room. Dawson was a small man and he seemed on the verge of losing his temper. He stared at me warily.

"I'm your lawyer," I said. "The name is James Watkins. I understand that you want to confess?"

He shrugged casually. "Wouldn't it go easier for me?"

"How does your leg feel?" Tate asked. "Any pain?"

Dawson looked down at the leg. "No. It was just a scratch."

The sheriff turned to me. "The

reason I asked him about the wound is because there was this case in Sheboygan where the man was arrested for drunken driving. He confessed to the charge at the station in the presence and with the consent of his lawyer, but the judge threw the case out of court anyway, claiming that the defendant was still too drunk at the time of the confession to be in full possession of his senses and know what he was saying."

I blinked, not seeing a connection between the two cases.

"I mean that if a man should be in pain from a bullet wound, for instance," Tate said earnestly, "then he also might not be in the full and free possession of his senses and the court's liable to throw out the whole thing. You can't be too careful, you know."

Dawson rubbed his forehead.

The sheriff watched him. "Got a headache?"

"Sure," Dawson said.

Tate turned to his deputy. "Bill, get him two aspirins and a glass of water."

When Bill returned, Dawson swallowed the two aspirins and seemed about to say something, but Sheriff Tate held up a cautioning hand. "I realize that the aspirins may already be at work in your bloodstream, but let's wait ten minutes to be sure."

Dawson looked at me and shrugged again.

I turned to Harrington. "You saw the prisoner at the safe?"

"Not exactly. But the back door was standing open and I knew I didn't leave it that way when I went upstairs for the night."

"So you rushed to the alley door and you saw a dark figure running? Or *thought* you saw him running?"

"He was running all right," Harrington said positively. "There was a quarter moon out. Maybe more."

"And you began spraying bullets all about the place? How many shots did you fire?"

"Five or six."

"All of them aimed at the fleeing man?"

"Sure."

"But only one bullet hit him? And a graze at that?"

"Well, it was dark," Harrington said defensively. He quickly corrected that. "Not *too* dark to see him. But I'm not such a good shot. That's what happened."

"As a matter of fact," Sheriff Tate said, "one of Harrington's bullets went through Ray Janecki's kitchen window, just about head high. Would have got Ray except that he happened to be in bed at the time." He turned to Dawson. "How's the headache?"

"Improving," Dawson said.

"What's for breakfast?" he added.

Tate was faintly startled. "Breakfast? We'd better get you something to eat before you say another word," he said quickly. "I don't want the confession to be tainted by the fact that you might be acting under the stress of hunger."

After about fifteen minutes, Tate's deputy returned from the diner next door with a tray of food.

While Dawson ate, I studied Harrington. "Have you got a grudge against this man Janecki? The one whose head you nearly shot off?"

Harrington's voice squeaked slightly. "Grudge? Why should I have a grudge against Janecki? He's not even a regular customer."

Tate had been paging through the Sheriff's Manual. He looked up. "Isn't Chuck Biddle's house right next to Janecki's?"

"I guess so," Harrington said. "Why?"

Tate turned to me. "Last week Harrington caught Biddle's wife shoplifting in the store."

Harrington nodded. "A jar of maraschino cherries and two cans of anchovies. They don't really need the stuff, but they take it anyway."

Tate agreed. "Biddle got pretty upset when he found that Harring-

ton had turned her over to me. Claimed a little thing like that should be settled quietly without going to the authorities. Even threatened to punch Harrington in the nose."

I smiled thinly in Harrington's direction. "You're worried that Biddle will do just that?"

He drew himself up. "Biddle don't worry me. I told him to take his shoplifting to some other store, and as far as I'm concerned, that closes the incident."

Sheriff Tate closed his manual. "I think that in order to play this absolutely safe, we ought to tape record the fact that I'm letting the prisoner know his rights, and also we ought to tape the confession." He spoke to his deputy. "Do you know anybody in town who's got a tape recorder?"

"There's Millie Pritchard," Bill said and left the room.

I focused upon Harrington again. "You admit that the safe wasn't even opened in this so-called robbery attempt?"

"Maybe not," he conceded. "But at least there's breaking and entering."

"You saw Dawson break and enter?"

"No, but the back door's been jimmied. You can see that for yourself if you want to."

I smiled patiently. "I will grant

that the back door was jimmied, but we don't really know who did the jimmying, now do we? Just suppose this is all really a cover-up for an attempt to put a bullet through Biddle's head?"

Harrington bristled. "I didn't even hit Biddle's house."

"You admit you're a lousy shot, and you'd been drinking—I can smell it on your breath."

He colored. "I wasn't drinking when it all happened. I took a couple of swallows later to steady my nerves. Besides, why should I shoot at a dark window?"

"A trick of the moonlight on the pane made you think you saw Biddle at the sink getting a glass of water. And you intended to cover up this murder by pretending an accident occurred while you were shooting at this alleged safecracker."

Harrington exploded. "*Alleged?* If Dawson wasn't the safecracker, then why was he running down the alley?"

"Come now, Harrington," I said. "Suppose you were innocently returning to your hotel after a movie and suddenly someone who'd been drinking popped out of a doorway and began shooting at you. Wouldn't you run, too?"

Harrison snorted. "Why would he be walking through the alley? What's wrong with the streets?"

"He was taking a shortcut."

"There's only one hotel in this town and one movie house," Harrington said, "and the alley isn't between them. Besides, it was three in the morning and the last movie lets out somewhere around midnight."

Dawson looked up from his cup of coffee and waited.

"He got lost and was lost for a long time," I said. "He admits he's a stranger in town."

"What about the safecracking tools?" Harrington demanded.

"All right, what about them? Are you positive that they *are* safecracking tools? Besides, how in the world is anyone going to prove that they belong to Dawson? I understand that there are no fingerprints."

Tate's deputy returned, carrying a tape recorder. "We can use only the last half of the tape, Sheriff. Millie recorded some songs on the first half and she doesn't want them erased." He put the recorder on the table and plugged in the cord.

We listened to the closing bars of *La Estralita* as sung by a fair country soprano before the deputy stopped the tape and handed the microphone to Tate. "All set, Sheriff. Just talk natural and don't get nervous."

Tate cleared his throat and care-

fully recited the formal warning to the prisoner as printed in the open Sheriff's Manual before him. When he finished, he wiped the palm of one hand on his trousers. "And now I turn this microphone over to the prisoner, one Samuel Dawson."

Dawson dabbed at his lips with a napkin and took the microphone. "I was walking home from this movie, minding my own business. I got lost and after wandering around for a couple of hours or so, I happened to try this alley and just . . ."

Sheriff Tate and Harrington were quite unhappy when Dawson finished speaking.

I smiled. "Let's face it, Harrington. There isn't much of a case against my client. You admit that you did not even see him on your premises at all; and besides that, you're vulnerable, Harrington. You discharged a firearm within the town limits without regard for the lives or limbs of your neighbors—at the very least."

I let a few seconds tick by. "If Dawson is taken to court, do you seriously believe that he stands even the remotest chance of being convicted? Especially if I represent him?"

Harrington ran his tongue over his lips. "Are you one of those big city lawyers?"

I shrugged. "I do have a suite in Chicago: Watkins, O'Brien, and Schultz." I smiled. "The verdict will, of course, be not guilty. I think that is obvious to all of us here in this room. A man is innocent until proved guilty, and here we have the word of a man who has been drinking against that of an honest, but unfortunate, shoe salesman. I wouldn't be at all surprised if my client turns on you and sues for grievous mental and physical suffering."

Harrington looked toward Tate for help, but Tate was busy running a forefinger down the table of contents of the Sheriff's Manual and evidently not finding what he wanted.

My tone was intended to be kind. "Perhaps I can persuade my client to forgive and forget this entire incident, especially since I feel reasonably certain that you merely had a few drinks too many and began shooting at phantoms in the night. You had no intention of assassinating Biddle and I am fairly positive that any competent lawyer could convince a jury of that." I almost patted him on the shoulder. "Possibly you don't even remember yourself exactly what did happen at three this morning. Now do you?"

Harrington closed his eyes, kept them that way for almost a full

minute. Then he sighed. "I don't remember a damn thing. Not a damn thing."

Five minutes after Dawson was released, I accompanied Sheriff Tate to the diner for breakfast.

He appeared rather tired as he took a stool near the window. "I guess you're pretty good at this lawyer business, aren't you, Mr. Watkins?"

I studied the wall menu and shrugged. "I've personally handled ninety-three criminal cases and everyone of my clients was acquitted."

Tate was impressed. "Really? And were any of them innocent?"

I had a thoughtful drive to the state capital and checked in at the Madison Hotel. I asked for Dawson's room number and found him in the process of opening a bottle.

At three that morning, when Harrington pulled the drawer entirely out of his dresser, Dawson and I had been at the safe downstairs. I had departed immediately, but Dawson had unwisely chosen to spend time gathering up the tools rather than abandoning them

in the store. I had been safely out of the alley and around the corner when Harrington began shooting.

Now I took the drink Dawson offered. "I was going to see to it that you got a good lawyer. I didn't expect to fill the bill myself."

Dawson grinned. "On dull afternoons in small-town hotel lobbies, we have to talk about something and pretend to be what we aren't, but I never thought passing yourself off as a lawyer would pay any happy dividends." He poured some brandy for himself. "Maybe you missed your calling, Fred. You seem to have a gift for the law."

I nodded and looked out of the window, past the capitol dome, to the campus of the state university where I'd attended law school for six months over a decade ago.

Sam Dawson and I had been partners for almost five years. I thought we'd done well, but I could see now that our operations were really chicken feed, and realized where the real money must be waiting.

It was going to be a little difficult to tell Sam that I was going back to school for my degree.



The effectual narrator adapts to his audience, and thus does humour him.



THE BANK was robbed on the Monday morning after the deer season opened. That was what made it possible, the hunting season, and the snow, which had started on Friday. The town began to fill up with hunters, but then on Saturday when the hunting should have been splendid, the wind shifted, bringing rain, and

the back roads turned to mire. Sunday was miserable, with gray scudding clouds and intermittent sleet, but then it got colder and the wind came up strongly in the north. By Monday morning there was driving snow and the hunters stayed.

Joe Grignon, an expert guide, was sitting at the far end of the bar drinking coffee when the three men came into the Lumberjacks' Retreat.

"Hey," one of them said, "you hear about the bank robbery?"

They stomped and brushed futilely, the snow melting too quickly and leaving dark wet patches on the red coats. All three wore hunting clothes. So did the men at the bar, except that most of the hunting coats were hung on chairs or piled on benches in the back room. Most of the hunters did not know one another, but they were very friendly. Everyone is always friendly on the first weekend of deer season, but perhaps most friendly when the weather is bad, preventing competition.

The bar was lined with men, a

few still in red coats but the rest, in wool shirts, talking now about the bank robbery; the tables at the side of the barroom were full, and the booths behind, and in the back room Lou Adonis had put plywood across the pool tables and covered it with oilcloth so that there was more space to sit. Across the street there was a line of men two abreast standing dumbly in the snow waiting to get into Jack's Cafe, and up on East Main, Ma Hurley had declared a moratorium and sent all the girls over to the hotel to help cook and wait on table.

Joe Grignon sat at the far end of the bar with his coffee, listening to the talk. His red cap, with the green button of the guide's license, was pushed back so that his curly black hair hung down on his forehead. His scarlet coat, with the four black stripes that once meant it was worth four prime beaver in trade goods, hung dry on the back rest.

There was a momentary small space beside him and a man smelling of freshly oiled leather and new duck and aftershave lotion edged into it. Lou Adonis brought him a beer, looked at Joe Grignon's coffee cup and moved away.

"Well," the man said cheerfully, "at least there's a little excitement today."

Joe Grignon sighed. "There is, from time to time. If one is patient."

"But not a bank robbery."

"No. But usually by now there are several search parties for city hunters who have become lost."

"That's pretty exciting."

"Only for the man who is lost," Joe Grignon said. "Additionally, by this time there are usually a number of casualties."

"People getting shot accidentally?"

"There is always that question."

"That sounds pretty exciting."

"When the deceased was a dear friend of someone's wife it is occasionally interesting."

"Are they always deceased?"

"When they were a dear friend of someone's wife," Joe Grignon said. "Under such circumstances, the stray bullet is unfailingly accurate."

The man had been looking sidewise at Joe Grignon and now had identified the guide's license.

"This is a measure of the weather?"

"One other thing—no one has shot himself, either, so far—not pulling a loaded rifle from a car, nor climbing a fence. Only when the weather is superlatively bad does no one shoot himself."

"I see," the man said, smiling now. "And what does all this

mean as far as tomorrow's hunting is concerned?"

"Tell me," Joe Grignon said, "what is your line of work?"

"I am a dentist in Chicago."

"Excellent. It happens that I have a wisdom tooth that is a great nuisance. What do you recommend?"

"Well, I could give you an appointment, and you could come to my office. I would be glad to look at it."

"Just so," Joe Grignon said, "and I am a guide. If you would put a hundred dollars on the bar, I would be glad to discuss hunting with you for one full day. But it will have to be next year because I do not have any appointments open this season."

"Excuse me," the man said. "I did not mean to be rude."

"Of course not. It was entirely accidental."

After the dentist left, Joe Grignon sat at the bar, with the little space beside him. He could see down the length of the bar through the front window, past the moving silhouette of Lou Adonis, and the stationary silhouette of the palms in the window. Outside, the sheriff's car lumbered heavily up the street, paused briefly and a man wearing a lynx parka over his blue uniform stepped out and walked awkwardly but expert-

ly through the snow toward the Lumberjacks' Retreat. The snow in the street was nearly knee deep now, very wet, with the bottom inch or two watery slush so that it did not pack under traffic but sloshed to one side and formed again.

The man in the blue uniform dropped his parka on a pile of other coats and moved into the space beside Joe Grignon.

"You're a lousy policeman," Joe said. "Why aren't you out chasing bank robbers?"

"I'm not a policeman," John MacKenzie said. "I'm a game warden. The hell with bank robbers."

"Maybe the sheriff will say the hell with poachers, when the Indians start dropping dynamite in the Eau Bois next spring."

"The sheriff doesn't need help on bank robberies; he has the FBI."

"So," Grignon said. "They do not think you are a policeman either."

"They do not seem convinced that the sheriff is a policeman. I left when they discussed whether to give him permission to go to the bathroom."

"All right. The hell with bank robbers."

"Good," the game warden said. "Let's talk about hunting."

"What hunting?"

"Your party must be getting a lit-

tle nervous. They have invested a lot of money in you, and there is no hunting."

Joe Grignon shrugged. "It doesn't matter. For their investment they are guaranteed a deer."

"Even if there is no hunting?"

"There is always a little hunting."

Joe Grignon smiled disarmingly. "After all, I am a very dependable guide."

MacKenzie scowled.

"And now," Grignon said gaily, "you have visions of a hidden shack where I already have killed and dressed five fine bucks with impressive racks, in the event that there is no hunting."

"There are only four in your party, I heard," the game warden said, scowling.

"Five is to provide a choice," Grignon said. "Then there is one left over for Father Grenville's poor."

"Sure there is."

"One must never forget the church and its charitable works," Grignon said. "One never knows when there will be need for the prayers of little children."

"Let me catch you with five deer hanging up some place," the warden said stubbornly.

"That is the only way you'll catch me," Grignon said, still smiling. "If I let you."

"Everybody lies a little. A man

from the city tried to check a jackass through Savage's Station yesterday. He said he thought he shot a mule deer."

"Sometimes it is hard to tell."

"A jackass from a mule deer?"

"No," Grignon said. "Whether a man lies a little."

MacKenzie still was considering the alternatives involved when someone new came in the front door. He was wearing a topcoat, a business suit soaked to the knees, and a smart felt hat, and when he took it off to shake away the snow he had a trim eastern haircut. He looked around the steamy haze of the barroom, and when he saw the blue uniform at the end of the bar he came forward purposefully.

"A friend of yours, MacKenzie?"

"Maybe the sheriff has locked himself in the bathroom."

The young man stood very close behind them and said quietly, "Is this the guide?"

"Yes, sir," MacKenzie answered.

"Je suis Grignon," Grignon said.

"Does he speak English?"

"Very little," Grignon said. "Un petit."

"Good," the young man said seriously. "You may speak it now."

"Certainment."

The warden looked straight ahead out the window.

The young man said, "Someone left the bank in a great hurry this



morning. It is why I am here.”
Grignon said, “You mean the
bank robber?”

“I am not prepared to discuss

what has transpired,” the young
man said stiffly.

“Pardonnez mois.”

“English, please.”

"Excuse me. English it is."

"Very good. As I was saying, a man left the bank."

"You said that."

"Never mind. The point is, I would like to ask you a question."

"It is nearly noon."

"I am not authorized to buy you any lunch."

"Only to ask the question."

"That is correct."

"Excuse me," Grignon said, "but I have forgotten the question."

"I haven't asked it yet."

"Oh."

"Are you sure," the young man said to MacKenzie, "that this is the best guide in the county?"

"Yes," MacKenzie said.

"Merci," Joe Grignon said. "Beaucoup. And you are the finest game warden."

"He's the only game warden," the young man said. "My question is, how far could a man go on foot on a day like this?"

"After leaving the bank in a hurry?"

"All right, after leaving the bank in a hurry."

"Carrying money?"

"Say he was carrying money."

"A mile," Joe Grignon said. "Possibly two, if he were strong."

"Very good," the young man said. "Is there any place within that distance where he might successfully seclude himself?"

"Even three miles," Grignon said thoughtfully. "If the money were very light."

MacKenzie said warningly, "Answer the question."

"There is such a place," Grignon said. "Is there not, MacKenzie?"

"I know of no such place," the warden said.

The young man waited.

"It is just possible," Grignon said, "that in all the length and breadth of the Coupe de Foudre, Monsieur, from the Coteau des Gros Pins on the south, along the vast watershed of Les Guerrieres and the twinkling waters of La Belle Lac des Mille et Une Lacs, to the forbidding frontier of Le Pay d'en Haut, there is one secluded place which is known to me but not to my good friend the warden."

"Yes," MacKenzie said, almost to himself. "Where he hangs the bloody deer."

The young man ignored MacKenzie.

"Take me there?"

"If you agree not to tell the warden."

"I cannot make any agreement like that."

Grignon shrugged. "Then let the warden take you."

"But you heard him. He does not know of any such place."

"Yes, I heard him."

"It is your duty," the young man

said earnestly, staring at Grignon.

"That's different," Grignon said.

"I am very public-spirited."

"Then you'll take me?"

"Of course. Since it is my duty."

"If I were you," the warden said, "I would not go."

"That is because you are not public-spirited," Grignon told him. "In addition, you have an evil mind."

"When?" the young man said.

"When can we go?"

Grignon looked at his watch, then turned on his stool and squinted across the room at a calendar.

"Tomorrow," he said. "If it stops snowing. If not then, possibly next week. Certainly," he said, "in the spring."

The young man's face went through minute tightening stages before it turned red. "Thank you for your time," he said tightly.

When he was gone, Grignon laughed until he wept. MacKenzie sat staring stonily out the window. It was a great effort.

"You are pretty funny," he said. "But it will not be so funny for the man who robbed the bank."

"You have faith that they will catch him?"

"Of course," the warden said. "They always do. A man cannot get off the road in this weather, and the roads are so bad he cannot get away fast. They have all the roads

blocked for a hundred miles, and when the snow stops they will have the airplanes up. Even if he gets away, they will have a thread from his hunting coat, or a couple of numbers from a license plate, or perhaps from his hunting license tag, and they will spend months quietly running things through the analyzers and computers and next year they will rap on someone's door and say politely, 'You're under arrest.'"

"The way you explain it," Grignon said, "it is all very complicated."

MacKenzie looked sidewise, suspiciously.

"It is fortunate that you became a game warden," Grignon said. "I do not think you have the head for this other work."

"You are not very much impressed."

"Un peu," Grignon said, "as they used to say back in the French seminar at the mission school."

"Sure they did."

"Suppose it were not so complicated," Grignon said. "Suppose a man were sitting at a bar somewhere, and it was very dull, and he thought it might be interesting to rob a bank."

"All right, suppose he were."

"Suppose he knew that Albert Tangora arrives at his bank an hour before the first teller, without fail."

"That is no great supposition.

Everyone here knows about it."

"And it is Monday morning, and the night depository is very full, from the first weekend of deer hunting when there was no hunting, but only the saloons and the hotel and Ma Hurley's, and the bags in the night depository are full of dirty, wrinkled old money that does not at the moment have any recorded pedigree, being of all denominations and numbers and quite unrelated."

"You're right," MacKenzie said. "This is very interesting."

"So suppose this man at the crowded bar announces he must make a short trip to the washroom, and goes back through the arch, and from the great pile of hunting coats he selects one, and from another a stocking cap, and takes a cased rifle from the stack in the corner, and walks out the side door in the driving snow and up the alley to the bank."

MacKenzie did not say anything.

"And with the stocking cap pulled over his face, permitting him to see clearly through the yarn, he huddles at the front door of the bank in the snow, and taps on the glass, and Albert Tangora lifts the green shade and peeks out at him, seeing only a forlorn hunter huddling against the storm, what does he think?"

MacKenzie said. "You know what he would think, old Tangora.

He would think about some poor devil needing to cash a check because he played poker too long, or went to sleep at Ma Hurley's, and he would twitch his nose and giggle and speculate on all the details while he stood peeking out under the shade."

"Just so. And then he would open the door," Grignon said. "Would he not?"

"Yes," MacKenzie said. "The old fool."

"Now," said Joe Grignon, "suppose that when he opened the door, the man outside came in very quickly with the wind and the snow and judiciously poked Albert Tangora in his fat belly with one end of the cased rifle, and when Albert bent over with a mighty grunt, the man then thumped him sufficiently on the head with the other end."

MacKenzie said thoughtfully, "It would not take a man long, then, to empty the money from the bags in the night depository, and to walk out."

"Locking the door behind him," said Joe Grignon. "And then walking rapidly with his head down against the snow, like a hundred other men in the same block on the same sidewalk, return down the alley, put the rifle in the stack, the coat on the bench and resume his place at the bar, all in less time than it would have taken for him to wait

his turn there at the bathroom."

The warden looked hard out the window. The snow was beginning to let up. Several men at the bar began to talk about going hunting, and a few straggled after their coats. The warden sighed heavily.

"It is too simple," he said. "Even if it were that simple, he eventually would start to spend the money and then he would be caught."

"I am not sure," Grignon said. "Suppose it were not the money, after all. Suppose when he returned with the coat pockets stuffed full of money, he took a handful and put it in this coat, and another handful in that coat, and so on. There must be fifty coats back there on the bench, to say nothing of those that are hung carefully on the racks."

"You make a joke of it," MacKenzie said, "but a bank robbery is not a joke. Whatever it is, it is no joke."

"Even so," Grignon was smiling. "Do you remember my grandfather?"

"The one who killed the bear with the hatchet?"

"Now you have it." Grignon still was smiling but he was very serious. "For this reason, he is very well remembered, even by those who have no idea whether he really killed the bear, even," he said slyly, "though I am not sure myself that there was any evidence at the time

that would have stood up in court."

"Except the dead bear."

"Of course. There was the bear, in the one case. In another there might be something else."

"Money, for instance."

"You are very quick, for a Scotsman."

MacKenzie said nothing. He picked up his coffee cup, sipped, then made a small disgusted sound because the coffee was cold.

Grignon said gently, "When my grandfather was young, a man who felt himself different than other men did not have to talk about it. He could fight a bear, and there was no need for talk."

"Unless the bear won."

"The risk is essential," Grignon said. "Each man who would be daring must find the ultimate risk, in his own way."

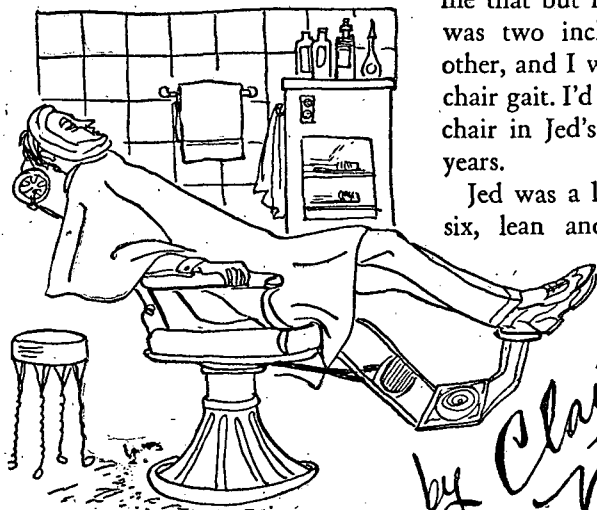
Outside, the snow was definitely stopping, and hunters were beginning to leave. One stopped at the bar to pay for the last round of drinks, put his hand in the pocket of his red coat and took it out. Startled, he looked at the wad of ten and twenty dollar bills in his hand. Then, quickly, he took a ten from the wad and tossed it on the bar and left.

"After all," Joe Grignon said smiling. "What does money matter, so long as one has one's health, n'est ce pas?"

A spontaneous solution to a momentous problem is, of necessity, implemented by one's environment.



The Man in the CHAIR



JED PARDEE was an artist with a straight razor, and painfully conscientious. If he so much as nicked a customer, he'd flutter like a mother hen and apologize profusely.

In a way, we were both misfits. I can't count the times he'd said, "Ralph, we're neither of us good for anything but a shave and a haircut, maybe a shampoo now and then."

Ralph Hines, that's me; the Gimp. Hardly anybody ever called me that but it fit. One of my legs was two inches shorter than the other, and I walked with a rocking chair gait. I'd held down the second chair in Jed's Barber Shop for ten years.

Jed was a little guy, maybe five-six, lean and leathery from the

by Clayton
Matthews

desert sun. He'd had the little hole-in-the-wall barber shop in our little southwestern town for twenty years, having come out from the East with lung trouble.

He was married and had a fourteen-year-old son, Garth. Jed was well past fifty, having gotten married late in life. He doted on the kid and spoiled him rotten. Still, Garth mightn't have been such a bad kid but for his mother.

Irene Pardee was around thirty and not bad-looking, if a little on the plump side, but she was discontented; discontented with her life, our town, most of all with Jed. Don't ask me why she married him; that happened before my time. I guess it was one of those mismatches you often come across, and you wonder how the devil it ever happened. That was Jed and Irene.

Jed ignored her carping as best he could, but she had Garth's head filled with nonsense like, as soon as he could, he should get out of our town and go where he could make something of himself. Exactly what, she never made clear. She *did* make clear that only a dumbhead would barber for a living.

Maybe our town was, as Irene said at every opportunity, "Deadly, dull, stultifying, dying on the vine." She used words like that, words she'd probably picked up from watching TV soap operas; but,

aside from Irene and maybe one or two others, most of us liked the friendly little town of around two thousand souls, and nobody stepped on anybody else's toes. Like I said, nobody called me Gimp—until Tony Dark came to town.

No airlines or trains served our town; a cross-country bus stopped once a day to drop off newspapers and an occasional passenger. The bus stop was the drugstore directly across the street from the barber shop. Jed was working on a customer, and I was standing at the front window looking out when the bus stopped on that Thursday afternoon.

I suppose I was one of the first to see Tony Dark. He was standing on the curb lighting a cigarette, two suitcases flanking him like bodyguards, when the bus pulled away. To say that I felt a premonition of danger when I first saw him would probably be adding a melodramatic touch, yet I felt my gut tighten like a bowstring.

Certainly he didn't look dangerous. He was slight, about Jed's size, with a city-white complexion and wearing city clothes of an expensive, if somewhat flashy, cut.

As I watched, he picked up the bags and crossed the street toward the shop. The temperature was well over the hundred mark, and I saw sweat beading his narrow, dark

face as he came resolutely on.

He set the bags down and stepped inside, exhaling in relief under the impact of the air-conditioning. His glance moved to Jed and the man in the chair, then came to rest on me. His eyes were so gray as to be almost white.

"No shoeshine boy?" His voice was harsh, flavored by an East Coast accent.

I said, "Not in the shop here. On weekends you'll find a kid or two on the street hustling for quarters."

His thin mouth formed a sneer. "It figures." He looked down at his pointed black shoes, then rubbed each one free of dust on a pant leg. "Any hotels in this cross-roads?"

"No hotels. Two motels." We weren't on a coast-to-coast highway, but there was some tourist traffic.

He asked directions to the motels and I told him, speaking as civilly as I could. I was already regretting having told him about the motels but, whatever his purpose in town, he was stuck until tomorrow's bus. I guess something in my manner or voice grated on him. He gave me a sharp look, but merely grunted and left the shop.

Jed asked, "Who was that, Ralph?"

"I haven't the foggiest. He just got off the bus. A salesman, would

be my guess. Probably be gone tomorrow."

"You should have asked him to sit and chat a while."

That was Jed for you. He was friendly as a puppy and would talk all day, especially to a stranger. I suppose that came from being married to Irene. He seldom got a chance to open his mouth around her.

My prediction about Dark leaving the next day couldn't have been more wrong. He came into the shop the next morning for a shave and haircut, waited until Jed's chair was empty, then asked him a whole hatful of questions about the town. Jed answered them all, cheerfully and at length.

I noticed that Dark said almost nothing about himself. He did say, under Jed's not too subtle prodding, that he was in the desert for his health. That, of course, started Jed off anew.

Dark looked healthy enough to me. Not that I didn't believe him, but I knew that my understanding of the "for my health" line was completely different from the meaning Jed would get from it.

Dark stayed on. Every morning he came into the shop for a shave, once a week for a haircut and a shampoo. He always waited until Jed's chair was empty. I grew increasingly uneasy. Certainly he gave

me no cause for this feeling. He was pleasant enough, if not overly communicative, but I had a strong hunch he spelled trouble.

My hunch proved correct.

Two weeks to the day after Dark arrived in town, Dave Rooney burst into the shop early one morning in a state of agitation. This wasn't unusual for Dave, a voluble Irishman of fifty, who seemed to exist in a constant state of agitation over one thing or another. He runs a small repair shop, and this time it seemed he had ample reason to be upset. "You know this new guy in town who's staying over to Belle's Motel?"

There were no customers in the shop. I was deep in a book, and Jed was leafing through the morning paper. He said, "Sure. Name's Tony Dark. He comes in here every day."

"Well, he came to my shop yesterday. He said he was selling insurance."

Jed frowned. "Insurance?"

"Protection insurance. If I'd take out a policy with him, five dollars a week, he'll guarantee nothing will happen to my shop, such as vandals throwing a brick through my window. Vandals, I said, in our town? I told him to go peddle his insurance someplace else. He just smiled and left. Then, just now when I came down to open up, I

found somebody had tossed a brick through my window during the night!"

I sighed inwardly. It was like finally hearing the other shoe drop. I had to hand it to Dark for one thing. He was playing it smart, not too greedy. Five dollars a week wasn't an exorbitant sum, yet there were twenty businesses in town. A hundred dollars a week would keep him comfortably until whatever his purpose for being in our town ran its course.

Jed was incredulous. "But I don't understand!"

"It's simple enough," I said dryly. "Pay this guy Dark five dollars a week or you'll suffer little accidents that will plague you like a toothache and finally get so bad you can't operate."

Dark didn't hurry things. During the next two weeks he worked on one business at a time. He didn't come on strong, just dropped a gentle hint that he'd see nobody was bothered if the five dollars a week was paid. Annoying accidents happened to those who balked. John Redfield, who owned a small restaurant, came down one morning and found his trash and garbage barrels overturned and the contents strewn all over the sidewalk. It cost him ten dollars to get the mess cleaned up.

Little things like that happened

to all the others who balked. After the first half dozen "accidents", the rest fell into line.

Police? Sure, we had a deputy sheriff, Luke Cosgrove, an easy-going, affable man of forty-five who was at a loss about the whole thing. "What can I do?" he said to Jed. "It's not against the law to sell what this Dark calls 'protection insurance', at least no law I know of. I've talked to him about it and he says he's doing nothing more than offering a sort of guard service. If I could catch him breaking a window or something, that'd be a different story, but so far I haven't been able to."

As Luke was half-owner of the hardware store, two-fifty a week went to Dark out of his own pocket. I guess most folks finally decided that since the deputy sheriff was kicking in without too much squawk, they might as well go along.

Of course, there was the state police. They had more to do with actual law enforcement than Luke, at least when any serious crime was involved, but our people preferred handling their own problems and only brought in the state police when a murder—one in the ten years I'd been there—or a crime of like nature was committed.

As John Redfield said, "The state cops'd laugh at us. It's penny-ante

stuff to them. They'd only say we should handle it ourselves."

The thing of it was, we didn't seem to be *able* to handle it. A number of suggestions were made, but none were acted upon.

Jed was the last one Dark contacted. Why that should have been I never quite figured out. Garth was in the shop when Dark came in. We weren't busy, so Dark got into Jed's chair right away.

Dark jerked his head at Garth. "Shine boy?"

"No," Jed said stiffly. "That's my son."

Dark arched an eyebrow, but he made no comment. As I've mentioned, Jed was short, also he was dark. Garth was tall for his age, already taller than his father, and very blond, all of which he got from Irene, who was taller than Jed and blonde.

As Jed prepared to shave him, Dark said, "I guess you know I'm selling protection insurance. It's only five a week . . ."

"I've heard," Jed said, and slapped a towel over Dark's face.

Jed had a mule's streak of stubbornness, and I knew he wasn't happy with the way everyone had knuckled under to Dark's extortion. Also, there was Garth, listening and watching, peeking over the top of the magazine he was pretending to read. Garth avidly read crime

stories, both fact and fiction, and tended to romanticize crime figures.

Finally the shave was completed. I held my breath as Jed marched over to the cash register, punched it, then came back and dropped a five dollar bill into Dark's lap.

"The first week's premium."

Dark picked up the bill, snapped it between his fingers, and smiled. "Good! Fine! Now nothing will happen to your shop."

Jed snorted, said nothing.

Dark got out of the chair, paid for the shave and started to add a quarter tip, as he'd always done before, then changed his mind. Instead, he turned toward Garth. "Here, kid, have a malted on me," and he sent the quarter spinning through the air.

Garth stretched up a long arm and caught it deftly.

Dark chuckled. "Good catch, kid. First base?"

Garth grinned happily. "Third."

Jed had opened his mouth to protest, had taken a half-step forward, then stopped without uttering a word. He darted a quick glance at me, color staining his face. I looked away, divorcing myself as much as possible from the whole thing.

Just before Dark reached the door, Irene breezed in. Dark stepped aside politely, said, "Mrs. Pardee?"



Blue eyes rounding, Irene nodded.

"You've got a fine boy there." Dark jerked his head. "A great kid, I can tell."

"Why . . . Why, thank you!" Irene said breathlessly.

Dark waved one hand grandly and went on out.

Irene smiled vaguely after him for a moment. "Was that—"

"That's Tony Dark," I said.

"Why, he seems nice enough."

"Nice!" Jed suddenly exploded. "He's a crook, a criminal, an extortionist!"

Irene looked at him in that narrow-eyed, contemptuous way she had. "A criminal? If he's a criminal, why hasn't he been arrested? He's just smarter than the rest of you, is all. You're envious, that's it! He's thought of a way to make . . . What? A hundred or so a week? I think I could admire a man like that!"

"Admire! Irene, you don't know what you're—" Jed broke off to look guiltily at Garth. "You shouldn't talk like that in front of Garth. You'll give him wrong ideas."

"Wrong? I'm not so sure they're wrong. That man's way seems better to me than cutting hair and maybe earning fifty dollars a week." She swooped down on Garth and gathered him under her wing. "Come on, darling, let's get out of here!"

Dark made the shop his base of operations, in a manner of speaking. Instead of collecting from each business personally, he left word he'd be in the barber shop at a certain hour every morning. He'd be in the chair, getting a shave, haircut or shampoo, and they'd troop in, one at a time, and hand over their five dollars without a word. He seemed to delight in humiliating the town, and Jed, in such a manner.

One morning he waved a dollar

bill at me. "Go up the street to the coffee shop, Gimp, and bring me back a carton of coffee, two sugared doughnuts. Keep the change."

I took the bill, and limped out. That, too, became a daily ritual.

Our business dropped off. People seemed ashamed to come into the shop unless they absolutely had to. Of course, Jed's was the only barber shop in town, the nearest other shop forty miles away, too far for most of them to drive. Even so, our business fell off by at least a third.

It wouldn't have been so bad if we'd had some indication as to how long Dark intended staying. He seemed to be settled in for good, and I couldn't quite figure that. He was a city man, used to prowling the neon jungles and feeding off the prey he found there. Maybe that was why the people in town couldn't cope with him. He was a strange breed to them.

With Jed, it soon became personal. Irene and Garth came into the shop almost every morning while Dark was in the chair.

Oh, it wasn't romantic, nothing like that. Even if such thoughts were in Irene's mind, I doubt she was Dark's type. No, it was Garth he was wooing. That puzzled me, too, until I thought about it a little. Dark had been clever enough to sense Garth's willingness to

make a hero of him. I'm sure it was a totally new experience for Dark and a most enjoyable one. He played the role to the hilt, being Big Brother, buying Garth soft drinks, whispering and laughing with him while Irene approved from the sidelines.

Jed daily grew more morose and withdrawn. He tried to discourage Garth from associating with Dark. Garth listened, respectfully as he always did, then went home to Irene and she, I'm sure, told him to ignore any counsel his father might give him. After all, what did a shave-and-haircut barber know?

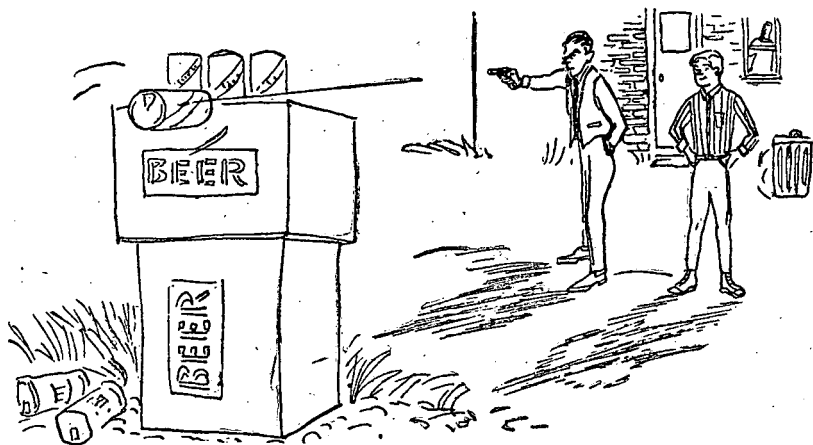
Jed finally gave up and just watched. The once-a-week drama enacted by Jed and Dark would have been comic under any other circumstances. On Jed's payday Dark would come in, plop down in Jed's chair and inform him what service he wanted that day. Before beginning, Jed would march over to the cash register, take out a five dollar bill and drop it into Dark's lap, all without a word being spoken. Then, when he was ready to go, Dark would pay whatever he owed, no tip.

And me? When Dark was in the shop and my chair was empty, I kept my nose buried in a book or a magazine. Unless, that is, I was out for coffee and doughnuts for Dark.

Then a new element was added. Although I was sure Dark had a gun around somewhere, he hadn't once shown one. One morning right after we opened the shop, we heard gunshots out back. We looked at each other in wonder and Jed hurried to the back door, me limping after him.

There was nothing behind the shop but desert stretching away to the range of mountains lying like a smudge of smoke on the horizon to the north. On this morning there were two people out there, Dark and Garth. Dark had a gun, a small revolver. In that country, where it still was not unusual to see a cowhand or a hunter come to town with a handgun, usually a .45, strapped around his waist, the gun Dark had looked no more dangerous than a popgun. Yet it was deadly enough at short range.

Dark had several rusty tin cans lined up atop upended beer cases. He was a good shot. He didn't miss once. When the gun was empty, he motioned for Garth to set up more cans. Then he gave Garth the gun, showed him how to hold it, how to aim down it. Garth's first shot stirred up dust ten feet to the right of the target, but he was having the time of his life. We were too far away to hear what they were saying, but Garth's delighted shouts of laughter reached our



ears. It said more than words.

At my side, Jed was muttering under his breath. I sensed what he was feeling. He detested guns of all kinds. I recalled an incident about six months back when Garth had wanted a .22 rifle to hunt with. Jed had put his foot down, had fought with Irene about it, and had won a rare victory.

As Garth prepared to take his second shot, Jed took two steps toward them and I thought he was going to stop it. Then he halted, turned back and plunged into the shop without looking at me.

The gunfire kept up for a half hour before Dark came into the shop, alone. Jed spoke directly to him for the first time in weeks. He was pale but determined. "I don't want my boy handling guns, learning how to shoot."

Dark bared even white teeth in

an insolent grin. "That so? Why not?"

"Because I don't believe in guns!"

"It's a jungle out there, dad. A piece of iron and knowing how to use it can come in mighty handy."

"It might be a jungle where you came from but not here."

"Oh no? Think about that and you'll see where you're wrong. Besides . . ." Dark walked to the chair and sat down. "The kid tells me he's itching to get to the city where there's some action. His mother agrees it's a good idea. I'll be going back . . ." he paused, dark eyes glinting, ". . . someday. I told the kid I might do him some good, to look me up when he comes to the city." He settled back. "Just a shave today."

Jed was so angry he was trembling. He walked around behind

the chair to gain control of himself.

Dark whipped out a dollar bill, snapped it between his fingers. "Here, Gimp."

I took the bill and hurried out, only too happy to get away from having to watch Jed's scalding humiliation.

The next morning, gunfire sounded out back again. Jed and I went about getting the shop ready to open, not speaking, avoiding each other's gaze.

Then the back door slammed open and Garth burst in, face exultant and flushed. "Pop, guess what! I hit three cans in a row this morning!"

Dark followed him in, his eyes bright with malice. "Yeah, the kid's got a knack for it. Enough practice and he'll handle a gun like a pro." He got into Jed's chair. "Just a shave this morning."

Garth flung himself into a chair and began leafing through a magazine, but his glance kept shuttling to Dark, and I was sure he didn't see a thing in the magazine.

Jed started lathering Dark's face. Dark snapped a dollar bill between his fingers. "Gimp?"

I was halfway to the door when Jed's voice stopped me. "Ralph?" There was something in his voice I'd never heard before. A tingle went down my spine, and I faced

around. The sight stunned me.

Jed had Dark's head tilted back, his hand under the man's chin as though ready to shave his neck—only the razor wasn't moving. The edge rested lightly against the skin. The least pressure, a practiced flick of Jed's wrist, and the razor would slice into Dark's neck as easily as going into butter. Dark's hands were gripping the chair arms so tightly the veins in his wrist stood out like blue ropes.

From his chair Garth was staring pop-eyed, the magazine lying forgotten in his lap.

"Now don't move, Dark," Jed said very softly, "or you know what will happen. You can feel the edge of the razor, can't you? Feels like a sliver of ice, right?" His voice changed. "Ralph, take his gun."

I approached the chair from Dark's right, reached up under his coat and plucked the revolver from the shoulder holster.

As I stepped back with the gun, Dark's body jerked, ever so slightly, and a jagged red line stained the lather on his neck, like strawberry coloring squirted into an ice cream soda.

"Now, you see?" Jed said, his voice very soft again. "You moved. I jerked my hand back just in time. Next time I won't. I'll tell you how it's going to be," Jed said,

still in that soft and deadly voice. "When I finally let you out of this chair, you're going to your motel, pack your bags and catch the afternoon bus out of town, and we'll never see you again. You run back to that jungle you came from. Oh, yes, the gun . . . We'll keep that, just to be on the safe side. Now . . . I'm going to back the razor off a couple of inches, no more. Just enough for you to nod yes. If you don't . . . Well, I'm sure I don't have to draw you a picture."

Jed moved the razor back. Dark swallowed convulsively, then nodded quickly, his head moving so little I would have missed it if I hadn't been watching.

Jed stood back. "All right."

Dark slipped sideways out of the chair, his hypnotized gaze on Jed. Jed tossed him a towel, and Dark swabbed the lather from his face, then scuttled out of the shop without looking back.

Garth, who had been watching it all in open-mouthed awe, broke for the back door. I knew where he was going, and I'd have given ten years of my life to have seen Irene's

face when he told her what had happened.

The instant Dark was out of the shop, Jed loosed a soft sigh. "Ralph, do you think it'll work?" he asked in a shaky voice. "Do you think he'll really leave?"

"Yes, he'll leave. I'm sure of it," I said.

I didn't tell him why I was so sure. But I knew Dark and his kind. Once you stand up to them and spit back, they fold up their tents, unless they're part of a syndicate operation, which is a different can of peas entirely.

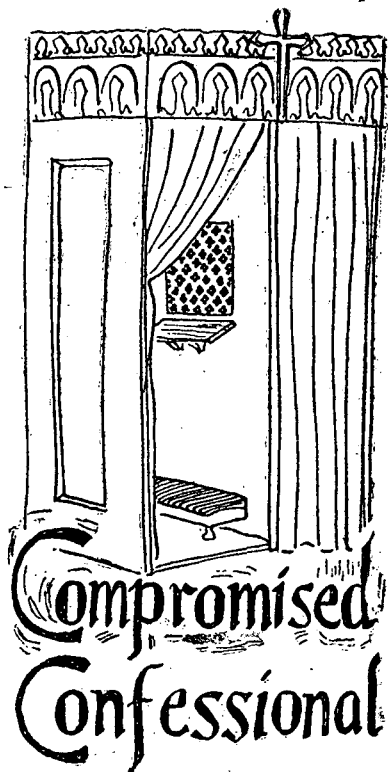
I'd been in his shoes once, running a protection racket with laundry and cleaning establishments. Everything had worked beautifully until one day I'd been taken for a ride by a laundry truck driver, and he'd tossed me out of the truck at high speed.

I had been discharged from the hospital with a permanent limp, had caught the next bus out of town and hadn't looked back once since.

"Yes, he'll go," I said. "You can make book on it."



In the words of Thomas Jefferson, "An error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it."



THE CITY lay perspiring under an August heat wave which shimmered mercilessly against the unshaded sidewalks of the Lower East Side and melted through the

dimness of Connolly's small shop in the East Village. "Electrical Supplies and Repairs—Stereo Our Specialty" read the faded hand-lettered sign which stood among a clutter of wires, speakers and spare audio parts behind a dirty display window.

In the back room, O'Doyle mopped his brow and observed, "One thing about the slam, it gives you a chance to do some thinking."

"Such as crime doesn't pay?" asked Connolly sardonically. He was a small, wiry man of fifty, with long slender fingers; mechanically talented fingers which could almost feel a faulty connection before his large gray eyes could spot the trouble. With such fingers and hard work, Connolly

By
**MARGARET
E. BROWN**

could have owned a prosperous mid-town shop. Instead, he preferred this seedy location where the customers didn't pressure him, where he could ignore schedules and tinker at repairs when the mood struck him.

"But it *can* pay if we go about it logically," O'Doyle insisted. "We got nailed because that Wilson guy didn't care who knew he was keeping his secretary. Right?"

"*You* got nailed," reminded Connolly, who was not above tapping an occasional phone for some of the area's shadier lawyers, or fencing stolen tape recorders, but who technically wasn't involved in the extortion attempt which had sent O'Doyle to prison for eighteen months. "Still," he conceded, "it did look like a perfect setup. Who was to know he and his wife had an understanding?"

"That's what I mean," said O'Doyle. "Who was to know? And I think I've got the answer: Look, people take their troubles to doctors, lawyers and psychiatrists, right?"

"So?" Bored by the discussion, Connolly picked up a stereo component and delicately probed its interior with a small screwdriver.

"But when they've done something they feel guilty about, they talk to priests, right?"

"Right," Connolly answered ab-

sentmindedly as he continued to search for the malfunction. Then, as O'Doyle's words penetrated his consciousness, he looked up in dismay. "You certainly don't think you can substitute for a priest in a confessional, do you?"

He saw the glee in O'Doyle's face and groaned. To him, O'Doyle's relish for disguises seemed foolhardy and dangerously childish, although he had to admit that O'Doyle was excellent at it. Once, he himself had been taken in to such an extent that he had tried to slip O'Doyle a ten-dollar bill under the mistaken impression that he was bribing a building inspector. Even undisguised, O'Doyle's average height and plain face were so nondescript that victims of his petty crimes could only tell the police helplessly, "He was so ordinary-looking."

Still, to pass as a priest; to walk blatantly into a confession booth . . .

"At least listen to my idea," urged O'Doyle.

A month later, Connolly was beginning to wonder if O'Doyle's idea was so brilliant after all. The Church of St. Jerome lay in a discreetly wealthy neighborhood east of Fifth Avenue, but the richly-carved oak pews were just as hard as those of plain pine found in a poorer parish.

Shifting uncomfortably in his pew at the rear of the sanctuary, Connolly tried to look contemplative as he watched the two confession booths which stood in a niche in the north wall, fifteen feet away from the nearest pews. He yawned covertly, examining the slowly moving line in front of the nearer confessional. No one seemed burdened by a load of guilt.

His eyes shifted to those seated in the side pews awaiting their turns: an attractive young girl impatiently drummed her fingers on the back of the pew; an older, gray-haired man at the end adjusted his hearing aid before returning to his prayers; in front of him, a middle-aged man dressed in immaculate brown tweeds gazed at the altar in anguish.

Connolly's pulse quickened. Surely so much agitation indicated more than the usual minor transgressions. At St. Jerome's, confessions were heard on Saturday afternoons, after the benediction on Friday nights, and on the evenings preceding holy days. So far, they had had nine opportunities, but had come up with nothing usable.

"If these people are confessing all their sins, they're too good to be believed," O'Doyle had complained.

"Then let's give it up," said Connolly. "Admit the idea's screwy."

"We'll give it another month."

Connolly became more alert as the tweedy gentleman entered the end confessional. Five minutes passed, then ten. At last the man left the booth, and Connolly noted with elation the predetermined signal. Unobtrusively he rose and followed the man from the church.

When O'Doyle entered the radio



shop that evening, dressed in an inconspicuous blue suit, he greeted Connolly with a triumphant grin. "Well?"

"It looks good," admitted Connolly cautiously. "His name is Marshall J. Wingate and he's vice-president of Thurgood and Crowley Import Company. What'd he do?"

"Had a fling with his wife's best friend. He says it's all over, but he's wondering if he ought to tell his wife. He doesn't want to, because it would break up his marriage and he seems to love his wife."

"We'll wait till tomorrow to call him," said Connolly. "We don't want him making a connection."

"He never will," gloated O'Doyle. "Who would ever suspect a confessional?"

Snow fell softly outside the leaded window panes of the study and the rectory smelled of Christmas greenery as Father Logan, pastor of St. Jerome's, studied the identification badges of the two plainclothesmen seated before his desk. He smiled at the taller, red-haired man and said, "You are Lt. Kelly, I suppose?"

"You'd make a fine detective, Father," Kelly grinned. "And this is my partner, Peter Swenson."

Swenson nodded stoically. He

was a Lutheran and felt highly uncomfortable in these surroundings. "I hope we're not interrupting anything important?" he said, noting the thick folders and papers covered with columns of figures which cluttered the desk.

"Any legitimate excuse to interrupt a diocesan report is always welcomed," Father Logan assured Swenson with a wry smile. Again, he looked at Kelly closely. "Are you perhaps related to one of our parishioners, a lawyer named Kevin Kelly?"

"My brother."

"Of course. The same red hair. How may I help you?"

Kelly leaned forward. "We would like to ask you about one of your priests—Father Murphy. I believe he's been here since September?"

Father Logan frowned and tapped his pen on the edge of the large oak desk. He was a short, slight man with thinning gray hair. Until he removed his steel-rimmed spectacles, he looked more like an accountant than a priest.

"That's correct. Why do you ask?"

"In a moment, please, Father," said Kelly. "Did you know Father Murphy before he came to St. Jerome's?"

"Why no; he came to us straight from the seminary in Buffalo. But

whatever is your interest in him?"

"Last week, a Dr. Geoffrey Quentin came in to see us. Do you know him?"

"It's difficult to know everyone in a parish this size; but yes, Dr. Quentin is a prominent member."

"Three weeks ago, one of his patients died during an operation and Dr. Quentin blamed himself for the failure."

"But surely such self-doubt is not uncommon among doctors? Nor a police matter?"

"No," agreed Kelly, lighting a cigarette, "but what is uncommon is that he is now being black-mailed for malpractice."

The priest's face showed concern. "How awful! But who? The anesthetist? A nurse?"

"Only Dr. Quentin did not believe death was inevitable for that patient. No one was aware of his doubts. No one," repeated Kelly, "except the priest to whom he confessed."

There was a shocked silence in the room.

Father Logan's voice was outraged. "Surely you are not suggesting—! You must be aware of the sanctity of confession!"

Ignoring the interruption, Kelly continued, "For some reason, that rang a bell with me. Last month, we had an extortion complaint from a Marshall Wingate.

"I see you recognize his name, too. What stuck in my mind was his mentioning that only a priest had known of his indiscretion before he told his wife. So we called him and learned that he, too, attends St. Jerome's and that he had confessed to Father Murphy. Dr. Quentin's confessor was also Father Murphy."

"A coincidence. It has to be," protested Father Logan.

"I wish it were," Kelly said bleakly. "I know the church teaches that a priest is a man with human temptations and human weaknesses; but we laymen do expect them to be more. Nevertheless, if he has violated a man's spiritual anguish for criminal purposes, it's a police matter. The law can't take his priesthood into account. We had to know, so I—" he paused, avoiding the older man's eyes.

"You made a sacrilege of confession in order to test him," the priest said flatly.

"Yes," Kelly admitted, stubbing out his cigarette.

His mind went back to the dim sanctuary where he had waited for Father Murphy to enter the confession booth. Standing behind an elderly wizened man, he had smiled inwardly at the tall, chic matron seated at the end of the pew near him as she took out the

earpiece of her hearing aid and plugged it into her ear. The vanity of women, he mused, that would keep her from using the conspicuous device in public except when she absolutely had to hear.

In the pew behind her, a baby cried sharply, piercing the stillness of the church. His young mother tried to soothe him and smiled apologetically at the others. A grandmotherly-type standing behind Kelly left her place in line and hurried over to help, murmuring endearments. A bottle was produced and the wailing stopped.

At two o'clock, two black-robed priests entered through a low door behind the main altar and passed briskly beneath the massive gray stone arches of the side aisle toward them. Father Murphy was a well-knit six-footer. Despite a close crewcut, his black hair still tried to curl, and his light blue eyes gazed out on the world from a deeply tanned face.

Remembering the academic reports he had circuitously obtained on Father Murphy, Kelly could readily picture him in white shirt and shorts, expertly covering a sun-washed tennis court. He would appear much more at home there than in this dimly-lighted medieval setting, garbed in heavy black robes.

Kelly had never felt his forty

years so acutely as now, watching Father Murphy's approach. So much seemed to be changing around him, things he had considered impervious to change. Thirty years ago, when he was a



young boy, crewcut, tennis-playing priests would have been unthinkable in his conservatively traditional, Irish neighborhood.

A priest was a Priest and stood high in the social hierarchy, aloof and unapproachable. On the street,

children said, "Good morning, Father," and hurried by, eyes averted. Certainly they had never had the audacity to stop and talk, to tug on his sleeve for attention as had the children he had seen clustered around Father Murphy the previous afternoon.

Father Murphy entered the middle section of the end confessional and closed the door. The lines moved forward. Kelly sighed. As a policeman, he had often performed distasteful duties; but line of duty or not, Kelly was a painfully honest person and he began to feel as deceitful as once at the age of nine. Then, he had waited for Father Flannagan to turn to him, only half-believing that he could deliberately not confess his theft of his brother's treasured automatic pencil.

The elderly man in front of him stepped into the now-vacant left section of the booth. Then a pretty young matron with a relieved look on her face left the right section and Kelly took her place, drawing the sound-deadening curtain behind him. Presently, the shutter slid back and, in the near-darkness, Kelly began the formal ritual: "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned . . ."

His feeling of guilt made his lies convincing as he told of tampering with a mythical jury. The

concern in Father Murphy's voice sounded genuine to Kelly's practiced ear; and his sharply probing questions were gentle. Kelly left the booth with his conviction of Father Murphy's complicity weakened.

From the church, he walked straight to his brother's apartment, without looking for a possible tail. He left that to Swenson, waiting outside; but Swenson had noticed no one on the busy sidewalks who seemed interested in Kelly's movements.

Inside Kevin's apartment, Kelly had confided the plan; and, although Kevin had thought the whole idea ridiculous, he had agreed to help.

Kelly paused in his narration and looked steadily at Father Logan. "That was two days ago. Last night, someone phoned Kevin and demanded \$1000 to keep quiet about our fictitious jury fix."

Father Logan sat silently in his large leather chair, his face ashen. "Could the booth be wired in some way?"

"No, we checked," said Swenson with positive finality.

The priest stared out at the falling snow a long while before speaking, almost to himself. "It's true I don't know Father Murphy well. A pastor often tends to get bogged down in administration,

fund raising." He gestured to his desk, piled high with paperwork. "And Father Murphy is not an easy person to know. He's so young, so new to his responsibilities, yet seems very serious and idealistic. He takes long walks alone thinking out his problems, his inner struggles, instead of asking for help.

"But to violate the confessional—" His voice strengthened and he struck the desk top with conviction. "No! I will not believe Father Murphy capable of such an act, no matter what circumstantial evidence you have!"

Father Logan rose, an even smaller man than he had appeared when seated behind the large desk. "I shall send for him and let him defend himself."

Swenson flashed a warning look to Kelly, who stood to block the priest's way.

"No," he said. "If he is guilty, we want his confederates. Obviously, someone trailed me to Kevin's and, just as obviously, it wasn't Father Murphy. He must signal someone to follow likely victims; to find out where they live, who they are. In this case, Kevin, since he's the only red-headed lawyer in that building."

"What do you plan to do?" asked the priest with resignation.

"We'll watch him," Swenson

said grimly. "We'll have someone on every exit of the church and rectory to see where he goes on those long walks. And Kelly and I are going to be in the sanctuary every time your Father Murphy's in the confessional, until we spot his signal and his partners."

"I am sure you will find him innocent," said Father Logan, but his voice sounded uncertain even to Swenson.

At 1:30 on the following Saturday, Kelly and Swenson entered the sanctuary of the church by separate doors. It was three days before Christmas, poinsettia plants were massed around the main altar, the gray stone columns wore festive holly wreaths, and the church was more crowded than the week before.

Kelly had a pessimistic feeling that they would have no more luck among today's crowd than on Tuesday when, following instructions, Kevin had stood on the corner of Broadway and 42nd Street holding a brown paper bag which contained newspaper strips instead of the specified money. Despite their precautions, an inconspicuous little man darted by Kevin, snatched the bag and melted into the pushing, milling throngs of holiday shoppers, all of whom seemed to be carrying brown paper bags.

That evening, when Kevin answered the telephone, a voice had snarled, "Very clever. We'll see who the joke's on when the newspapers get hold of the story."

"Publish and be damned!" Kevin had roared. (He had always longed to have a legitimate excuse to deliver that line.)

Nor had the stake-outs on Father Murphy provided any leads. He took long walks, true; but always alone along the East River where he stared out across the water for hours at a time. He spoke to no one on these outings and made no telephone calls.

As Father Murphy entered the sanctuary and made his way to the confessional, his face serene and yet vulnerable, Kelly suddenly became certain that the priest could not possibly be guilty. Yet who? And how?

He cast his mind back to the day of his phony confession. That grandmotherly-looking old lady who had stood behind him and had therefore been in the left section of the confessional while he was in the right section—could she possibly have overheard him?

"I'm grabbing at straws," Kelly glibed to himself, "all because I can't shake off my childhood trust; because I can't get it through my thick Irish head that a priest is human."

From his seat on the opposite side of the church, Kelly scanned the queues before the confessionals, trying to pick out a face familiar from last week's group. The grandmother was not there, but he did see the little wizened man. "Who left long before I opened my mouth," Kelly reminded himself.

The only old lady today was a stouter woman seated at the end of a pew near the booth, wearing a frivolous red velvet hat perched atop her soft white hair, her eyes closed as if in silent prayer.

Kelly began to examine the man behind her when his attention was suddenly riveted. A vague tingle swept over him as he watched the woman adjust her hearing aid. He swore in silent excitement, remembering the chic, middle-aged matron who had sat in that same seat the week before; a seemingly vain, well-to-do lady who had worn an incongruously conspicuous and bulky hearing aid when there are almost unnoticeable transistorized models to be had.

Wild conjectures filled Kelly's mind as he caught Swenson's eye and motioned him over with a covert gesture.

"Spot anything?" whispered Swenson as he slipped into the pew beside Kelly.

"Maybe. Duck out and get one

of the men. When you get back, watch both the doors. I'm going over to have a talk with that sweet little old lady. If you see anyone making for the door in a hurry, grab him."

"Will do."

Kelly waited quietly until he saw Swenson return; then, casually, he sauntered across the church and down the side aisle. He stopped beside his quarry and tapped her shoulder.

"May I speak with you outside, madam?" he inquired politely.

"I beg your pardon?" Their eyes locked; then the 'lady' stared at Kelly's red hair in consternation and tried to break away from his tightening grip. A purse fell to the stone floor with a clatter, spilling its contents of fine wire circuits and transistor tubes. Still clutching his prisoner, Kelly bent over and swooped them up.

"You picked the wrong place to do your eavesdropping, pal," he snarled to the startled O'Doyle.

Outside the church, they joined a jubilant Swenson. "This guy

seemed in a big rush," he crowed, handcuffing Connolly.

"Take care of them," said Kelly. "I'll be along with this later." With the purse tucked under his arm, he turned toward the rectory.

Father Logan eyed with distaste the sophisticated gadgetry which could overhear conversations up to fifty yards away without any connecting wires.

"What possible moral use is there for such equipment?" he asked sadly.

"None that I can think of, Father," said Kelly. He stuffed it back into the purse. "Are you going to tell Father Murphy?"

"No. Not now at least. The ordinary venialities of mankind are proving burdensome enough to him at this time. A priest's first year is often difficult." He sighed. "There will be time enough in the next few years for him to learn what depths are possible."

As Kelly started to leave, Father Logan smiled up at him and said, "Don't forget to make a good confession before Christmas, my son."



The perfect murder may be mechanically executed—but never humorously.



WINTER was quickly drawing near and the nights were long. I do not recall the precise moment at which Meltzer convinced me I should strike. I believe it was when he pledged to go with me. That would make him an accessory.

I do recall the shaking fist Meltzer held in front of my face, clenched and quivering, as if the secret of life were trapped inside.

"Power!" Meltzer said. "If you don't understand power—if you haven't *lived* with it—you've spent your time in a vacuum, wasted your existence! And what greater

power is there, my friend, than to take another's life?"

Meltzer had become a strong influence on me, in such a brief period of time. He was a large, dark man, about my age though far stronger than I. Meltzer customarily wore a dark blue suit, with a scarlet tie, and a black top-coat which he draped across his shoulders, much like a cape. I met him in the public library, in the history-biography section. We became friends almost immediately.

Since my retirement, I had been spending many evenings in the library, studying the lives of great men. It was this mutual interest that drew Meltzer and me together.

"The one trait great men have in common," Meltzer said, "is a will-

ingness to *strike!* Cowards and procrastinators never go down in history."

"And you?" I asked him.

"I have killed," Meltzer said without hesitation. "Not once, but several times. I know what power is. It is in my hands, to take a life or leave it."

"I find that hard to believe," I told him.

Meltzer shrugged and walked out, into the night.

Two days later I received a strange item in the mail. In a plain envelope, with no return address, was a small clipping torn from the daily newspaper. It told of the mysterious death of a middle-aged man, Wendall Whipple, in his hotel room. The news story said the police had no clues.

That night I was seated at a table in the library, lost in concentration in a biography, when Meltzer took a seat opposite me. Without speaking, he dropped a dog-eared piece of paper on the table in front of me. I turned it over and saw it was a driver's license. The name on it was Wendall Whipple.

"Coward," he said.

"I am no coward."

"Coward," he repeated.

"How do you get away with it?" I asked.

He stood up and left the library.

"Are you watched?" Meltzer asked me, the next time we met.

"Are you accountable for your time? Does your wife keep track of you? What does she do at night, when you're at the library?"

"We're old people," I told him.

"We're lonely. We don't talk much.

I don't know what she does. Maybe she goes for walks. Or sleeps. Or sits on the balcony. Or watches television. I don't ask. She doesn't tell me. I don't know."

"Are you ready?" he asked me.

"How do you get away with it?"

"The secret," he said, "is to leave no clues. None. Absolutely none. If you are never caught, you can escape capture indefinitely. That sounds obvious, doesn't it? But it isn't. Once you are caught, or even if you arouse suspicion, however faintly, you must quit. But if you are never suspected, you can go on forever."

"I don't understand," I said.

"Police," he said, "have logical minds. They look for *reasons*. Connections. If a man is killed, they first suspect his wife. Then his children. His other relatives. His friends. His enemies. His business associates. *Someone* must have wanted him dead. If they find no motive, they go into their files and suspect the known criminals."

"And you?" I asked.

Meltzer smiled. "I do not kill my

wife. I do not kill my children. I do not kill my friends. I do not kill my enemies. I do not kill my business associates."

"You kill strangers," I said.

"I am not a known criminal," Meltzer said. "I do not leave clues. I do not leave fingerprints or footprints. I do not leave weapons. I make sure there are no witnesses."

"You have power," I said.

"I *am* power. Are you ready to strike?"

"Yes," I said. "Tomorrow night."

"It will be the first day of a new life—a *real* life for you."

The next night I dressed warmly and put on rubber-soled shoes and a pair of gloves. I felt exhilarated at the prospect of what lay ahead.

"There is a park," Meltzer said. "A dark, quiet place. We'll look there first. Walk slowly."

We strolled to the park. It was enclosed by trees and shrubbery, the limbs bare in the winter night. A path led inside. There were benches, unoccupied. A mist hung close to the ground. I could barely see my feet.

We listened. I didn't hear a sound, but Meltzer touched my elbow and pointed. There, on one of the benches, was a solitary person, sitting in the night. Meltzer slipped something heavy into my hand. I knew without looking that it was a blackjack.

We walked silently, circling around behind the bench. Meltzer touched the back of my head, at a point just above the top of my neck. His breath was warm in my ear as he whispered, "Strike!"

I swung the blackjack, right on the target. I felt in my hand, up through my arm and into the center of my brain, the power of my blow and the crunch of the skull beneath my weapon. The body, with a muffled noise, slumped forward to the ground.

"Feel the pulse," Meltzer whispered.

There was no pulse.

"Turn the body over. Take a look."

I looked long and carefully into the face of the victim.

"Now we leave," Meltzer whispered. "Not too fast." He took the blackjack from me and put it into his coat pocket.

Despite the dark, I could tell that Meltzer was smiling triumphantly. "*Power!*" he whispered. "Now you know!"

The path took us through the trees and back onto the city street.

"You're not going to like this, Meltzer," I said.

"What?"

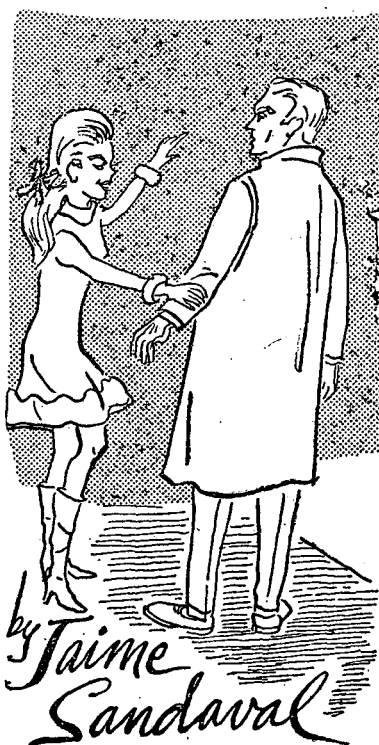
"I looked at the face."

"Yes? And?"

"Meltzer, we just killed my wife."

The man who looks a gift horse in the mouth may discover more than its age.

THE early morning fog had burned off and bright sunshine tempered the chill breeze. Taps Enderman approached the low-profiled, red brick building that housed the Carstairs Manufacturing Com-



pany and was within twenty yards of the glass street doors when a girl emerged.

Taps nodded in satisfaction. The telephone operator was on her way to lunch on schedule. He pushed his way inside, and was surprised at the brightly lighted lobby. An elaborately decorated Christmas tree stood in one corner, and a banner on the wall behind the tree pro-

claimed: OUR 50TH CHRISTMAS IN BUSINESS. MAY YOURS BE A MERRY ONE, TOO.

A smiling girl with tinsel in her dark hair rushed up to Taps. "Are you a customer, sir? Do you buy or sell to Carstairs?"

"I'm a customer," Taps agreed.

"Then help yourself to our money tree, sir."

For the first time Taps noticed the dozens of envelopes dangling from the greenery. "What can I win?" he asked. "A thousand dollars?"

The girl's smile was professional as she tried to lead him in the direction of the tree. "Sorry. There's one hundred-dollar bill on the tree, but most are fives and tens. There'll be another present from Carstairs, though."

Taps detached her hand from his arm. "Maybe I'll catch you on the way out, sis," he said. He walked up two steps and through another set of glass doors, turning for another look at the money tree and the smiling girl with tinsel in her dark hair.

He approached a railing which fenced off the receptionist's switchboard from the remainder of the administrative office behind her. The girl was speaking into a button-size mouthpiece. Taps examined appreciatively her olive-skinned

good looks topped by brown hair.

"This is Marilyn, Mr. Carson," the receptionist was saying. "I'm filling in for Barbara on her lunch hour. I'm not positive about those figures, sir. May I have Barbara call you? Thank you."

She looked up at Taps after flicking a switch. Her glance traveled the upper half of his seventy-four rugged-looking inches, rested for a second on the roughhewn planes of his swarthy features, then lingered for an instant on his brown eyes. "Yes, sir?" the receptionist inquired.

She had lost Taps' attention. He was looking beyond her into the open office space at a Valkyrie-sized blonde.

The receptionist turned as much as her headset permitted and saw the focal point of Taps' interest. "Yes, sir?" she repeated sharply as the blonde half-turned toward them.

"Jack Malsom of Greenway Products to see Mr. Carberry," Taps said casually.

"A Mr. Malsom of Greenway Products to see you, sir," the girl repeated into her mouthpiece after depressing another key on her switchboard. She looked up at Taps again. "First corridor to the left and fourth door on the right." Both tone and expression registered disapproval, and Taps swept

her with a coolly appraising scrutiny that brought a touch of color to her cheeks.

He turned into the first corridor to the left, then halted. There was no one visible ahead of him in the narrow aisle with its frosted glass doors stretching away in precisioned monotony. Beyond a wall at the far end of the corridor, machinery thumped and banged noisily. By straining, Taps was able to hear feminine voices from the area he had just left.

"Gee, who was that?" a high-pitched voice inquired. "I'd be shook up about meeting that one in a dark alley. Did you see his eyes? He was—he looked like—chiggers, here comes Grimes."

High heels click-clicked as the conversation lapsed. Taps smiled as he moved farther along the corridor. He knocked once on the frosted glass of the fourth door on the right which was lettered: **COMPTROLLER—WILMER CARBERRY**. Taps entered the elaborately furnished office and closed the door behind him.

A chubby man was standing behind his over-sized desk, his right hand extended while his left fixed his rimless glasses more firmly upon his nose. His welcoming smile wavered, then died, and his extended hand dangled limply. "You're not—I was expecting Jack.

I'm afraid you have the wrong office, sir."

"It's the right office," Taps replied. He approached the desk, removed a .38 special from his jacket pocket and placed it casually on the desk top, closer to himself than to the portly man. Wilmer Carberry stood goggling at it,



his expression a strained caricature of his welcoming smile. "Sit down, Carberry," Taps continued, pulling an extra chair to the desk and seating himself in it.

The comptroller floated down into his own chair in slow motion. "A joke?" he half-whispered, articulating with difficulty.

"A holdup," Taps said casually.

Wilmer Carberry looked pained, then incredulous. "I—I don't understand, Mr.—ah—sir. You've been—ah—frankly, you've been misinformed. We're a manufacturing concern, and we keep no cash on the premises. Even our payroll is handled by check. There's nothing—" he spread his hands in an empty gesture. "You can see that you've come to the wrong place?"

"I'm in the right place," Taps said. He leaned forward over the desk, and Carberry shrank back in his chair. "Let's understand each other, man. I'm going to tell you a few things to do, and I'd recommend seriously that you do them. Item one, you can answer a question. What's your firm's cash position at the bank right now?"

The comptroller's mouth opened, closed, and reopened. "*Cash* position? Why, you must realize that such—that such a question—that such information is highly—ah—"

The voice died out in a whimper as Taps picked up the .38, and the portly man's cheeks paled.

"Maybe you don't know much about a gun, Carberry," Taps said softly. "In three more seconds this one will give you a third eye in front and no back to your head. With all that noise out in the factory no one will ever hear it. Now

let's hear it in round numbers—a hundred fifty thousand?"

"Oh, my, no," Carberry gasped. "Not—not nearly that much. It's—it's difficult to pinpoint. It's a constantly fluctuating figure."

"So let's check on it."

The comptroller's tongue circled dry lips. "Did you say—*check* on it?"

"They do let you know what's going on around here?" There was an additional edge in Taps' voice.

"Of course," Carberry said hastily. "I'll call the bank." He reached for his telephone, then squeaked in pain as Taps lunged from his chair and slashed at the reaching arm with the front sight of the .38. Reversing the gun, he jabbed its muzzle against Carberry's throat.

"Like slower, man," Taps said harshly, and the comptroller's chin trembled from shock. "I want to see it in writing."

"Cer—certainly." Carberry swallowed hard. "If I—if I may call my secretary and have her bring in the cash book?"

"Be a little careful how you call her." Taps slipped the gun inside his jacket and the comptroller couldn't seem to take his eyes from the resulting slight bulge as he gingerly picked up his telephone.

"Ah—will you bring in the cash book, please, Emily?" Carberry said. He replaced the phone, re-

moved a handkerchief from his pocket, and dried the palms of his hands. "Ahhhh, here we are," he said with an attempt at his usual crispness as his office door opened and an attractive woman with youthful features walked in.

"D'you hire all the good-looking women around here, Wilmer?" Taps asked.

Carberry looked up from the cash book handed to him by his secretary, startled as much by the use of his given name as by the question. "Why—ah—no. The personnel manager—I do make an occasional suggestion."

Taps held out his hand and Carberry meekly handed over the leather-bound volume. Taps opened the book to the final column of figures and nodded approvingly. "You do have the horsepower, right enough, Wilmer." He handed the book to the waiting secretary who left the room.

Carberry stared fearfully at the 38 which reappeared upon the desk top. "You realize—you *must* realize that what you're attempting to do is—is futile," he said shakily. "You can't possibly hope—"

"Let me do the talking, Wilmer," Taps advised. "Right now you call Emily again and have her bring you a check made out to cash for \$115,000."

"To *cash*?" Carberry's voice soared. "It—it won't do you any good. My signature isn't sufficient. All our checks must be countersigned by—"

"Your treasurer, a gent you'll call into the office here as soon as the check is ready," Taps interrupted.

The comptroller drew a deep breath, wet his lips and started to reach for his phone. He withdrew his hand hurriedly until he received an approving nod from Taps, then picked it up. "Please have a check made out to cash for \$115,000 and brought to me, Emily. Then ask Mr. Newfield to step into my office."

"That's the boy," Taps approved when the phone was replaced.

Several minutes of silence ensued, during which the gun vanished again.

"How did you get past Barbara at the switchboard?" Carberry broke the silence.

"Barbara's on her lunch hour."

The office grew quiet again until Emily came in, carrying a check which she placed on the desk before Carberry. She was followed by a wisp of a man, rumpled-looking and wearing pince-nez glasses. Carberry signed the check after one false start, then turned it around and presented it and the pen to the newcomer.

"The cost of materials going into the Mahoney job is way over the estimate, Wilmer," the little man declared, accepting the pen. "We're going to have to refigure the job and then—"

"Later, Ted," Carberry said in a strained tone.

"Not too much later," the little man warned, starting to scribble his name beneath Carberry's. "If we don't protect ourselves we'll—" he paused, his writing hand still as he squinted at the check. He shot a glance across the desk at the comptroller, another at Taps seated in his chair, then completed his signature. "That Mahoney job could make a whale of a difference in our profit picture, Wilmer," he went on, pushing the check back across the desk.

"I'll get back to you on it, Ted," Carberry said, looking at the check as though he didn't believe it.

The little man grunted and departed by the door through which Emily had already left.

"Never thought you'd see the day, Wilmer?" Taps said when the door closed. "That's protocol for you. Never ask questions in front of the customer, right? Newfield will be back in twenty minutes to ask you what the hell that check is all about, in plenty of time to stop payment on it if he doesn't like the answer—he thinks." Car-

berry stared helplessly across the desk. "Call the big blonde in here," Taps continued.

"C-Carol?"

"The big blonde in the outer office. Give her the check with a note on it saying you want the cash in bills no larger than hundreds. Have her take it to your bank, which I happen to know is just around the corner. Then she's to bring the cash to you here."

Carberry made the phone call. "You obviously know a good deal about our routine and our personnel," he said after hanging up.

"But you still don't think I'll get away with it?" Taps said. "Let me read your mind for you, Wilmer. You're sitting there now, enjoying yourself for the first time since I walked into your office, because the cashier at the bank will call you to verify that a cash transaction of this size is on the up-an'-up." Taps leaned forward over the desk. "And what are you going to tell him, Wilmer?"

The comptroller shivered under the hard-eyed glare. "That it—that it's perfectly all right," he stammered. He wrote a note in a trembling hand, started to clip it to the check, then desisted when Taps reached across the desk and took the note from him. After one look, Taps handed it back.

"Write it again," he command-

ed. "That handwriting looks like a third grader's."

Another attempt went into the wastebasket before Carberry produced a note that Taps approved. Carberry sealed note and check inside a long company envelope as Carol entered the office. The big blonde looked away from Taps when she found his eyes on her.

"Slip on your coat and run this around to the bank, Carol," Carberry directed, handing her the envelope. "They'll give you a package for me."

Taps watched the exaggerated swing of the blonde's hips as she left the office. "Damn if I see how you stay out of trouble around this place, Wilmer," he observed. "Or maybe you don't?"

Carberry made no reply. He sat shriveled in his chair. The silence lengthened. After a few minutes there was a tap on the door. Newfield, the treasurer, opened it, saw Taps, waved to Carberry. "I'll catch you after lunch, Wilmer," the treasurer called, and closed the door again.

"Go ahead and groan," Taps invited the comptroller.

Several minutes passed before the telephone rang. Taps slipped the .38 out into the open again, and the comptroller's hand shook as he reached for the receiver.

"Oh, yes, Gordon," he said.

He sounded breathless, and Taps frowned. "Yes, it *is* unusual, but there's a large discount involved, and with a materials strike staring us in the face, I—we've decided to build up our inventory. Yes. What's that? Oh, you mean the girl. Give a thief something to think about besides the money she might be carrying, I always say. Heh-heh." He listened for a moment. "Yes, quite a—ah—dish, Gordon. Not for the likes of you and me, though. Thanks for your—ah—call." He replaced the receiver slowly.

"When Carol gets back, you and I will leave the office together," Taps said. He smiled. "Can't leave you around here to wise up Newfield too soon. We'll walk out to the parking lot together and drive off in your car."

"Please!" Carberry begged. He was obviously panic-stricken. "I'm not—I'm not a brave man. I have responsibilities, a wife, small children—"

"You'll see them for dinner at the usual time," Taps cut him off. "Provided you do as you're told. And provided you're through answering the questions of the stupid police by that time."

They sat in silence again until there was another knock on the door and Carol reentered the office. She handed Carberry a medium-sized package, neatly sealed. Taps'

eyes lingered on the blonde as she flounced out of the office.

The door closed behind her, and Taps held out his hand. The comptroller gave him the package. Taps broke the seal at one end and ran a thumb along the crisp contents. He nodded in satisfaction, then rose to his feet. "Don't panic now, Wilmer, and you're home free," he told Carberry. He showed the comptroller the .38 again, and the portly man winced. "This will be lined up on you when we pass through the outer office. Don't stop to talk, no matter what anyone says to you."

They left Carberry's office together and walked down the corridor, Taps a half-step behind. The package was under his left arm and his right hand was shoved casually into his jacket pocket. No one approached them, not even the girl at the money tree. Carberry pushed open the heavy glass outer doors and Taps followed closely behind him. Outside, they turned the corner of the building and marched in tandem to the parking lot.

"You drive," Taps said when the comptroller stopped beside a royal blue convertible. "Is it you or your wife who's the exponent of conspicuous consumption in your family, Wilmer?"

Carberry said nothing. His lips were pale, and his eyes were on Taps' right hand in his jacket

pocket. He wanted no accident.

Taps entered the car after Carberry and adjusted the rear-view mirror so he could observe following traffic without turning his head. "Roll it," he ordered.

They slid out of the parking lot into the traffic. For twenty minutes Taps called "left" and "right" in aimless patterns. "Okay," Taps said finally, when he was convinced they could not have been followed. "Pull it into the curb here."

They were approaching a busy intersection when he spoke. The car eased into the curb and stopped. Taps slid out the door on his side, the package under his arm, then leaned back inside. Wilmer Carberry's eyes widened in dismay as the .38 was again openly displayed, below the level of the dash. Taps stripped the cartridges from it quickly, wiped it, then dropped the gun onto the front seat.

"Tell the police I forgot it, not that I left it," he told the ashen-faced Carberry. "Your insurance company will pay off if you can show coercion." His grin was wolfish. "Keep it in mind when you're handing out descriptions, or I might drop around to your house some night and visit with your family." He flipped a hand salute to the quaking man at the wheel, stepped up onto the sidewalk, and blended with the crush of foot

traffic, advancing with the crowd.

In half a block he turned into a hotel entrance, walked through its long lobby and emerged on the next street. Across the street was another hotel. Taps strode into that one and exited via a side entrance. At the curb he hailed a cab. "Airport," he grunted to the cabbie, and settled down for the ride.

At the airport he removed an expensive piece of luggage from a locker, the type which could be slid beneath a plane seat. In the men's room Taps selected a cubicle and locked the door. He stripped the wrapping paper from the money, packed the money into the bag, shredded the wrapping paper and flushed it away.

Zippering the bag, he locked it, glanced at his watch. He had twenty minutes to plane time, time enough for a well-deserved drink.

Taps Enderman left the blackjack table at 4:30 p.m. on his third day in Las Vegas. He played only three hours a day, half in the afternoon and half in the evening, and always selected a table at which a big operator distracted the dealer's attention from Taps' conservative style of play. In four sessions he was \$320 ahead.

He sauntered upstairs to his luxurious room to shower and shave. He would take a nap, then have a

leisurely dinner. His first night in town he had dated the girl on the extreme left in the casino chorus line. Last night it had been the second girl from the left. Taps was looking forward with anticipation to working his way across the width of the monstrous stage.

He was asleep on his bed when the door to his room burst inward, shattered from its hinges, and several men rushed into the room. Taps' hand darted instinctively toward the gun under his pillow, but hard hands gripped his wrist. Another hand wrenched the gun from him. The gripping hands were replaced by handcuffs.

Taps rolled over slowly and watched cigar-smoking men removing packets of money from his bag and stacking them on the writing desk. "How'd you find me?" he asked numbly.

"You're too photogenic, creep," one of the cigar smokers replied. He flashed a picture under Taps' eyes. "Next time you case a job like the Carstairs job, make sure they're not taking color shots of their customers for Christmas presents."

Taps stared dully at the picture of himself in the Carstairs lobby standing beside the smiling girl with the tinsel in her dark hair, her hand on his arm facing him into the camera, and the money tree in the background.

The merit of commendation is, of course, relative to its source.

THE desk clerk called and said that there was a man named Harry Grant who wanted to see me. I asked if Harry Grant was alone. When the clerk confirmed that he was I said, "Send him up."

It was exactly seven-thirty in the morning and I didn't have to look at my wristwatch. I always have my coffee at seven-thirty. It's a

matter of routine. It's the way I run my business. I believe the way to succeed in any business is through strict routine, meticulous planning, and never leaving anything to chance. Veer off course and there are too many things to distract, too many irrelevant demands, and too much mind wandering that can prove costly. Keep your mind on your work is my credo.

It took me twenty seconds to get my gun with its attached silencer from the hiding place. I don't have a license for a gun, but since a



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By
**Michael
BRETT**

gun is the most important tool of my trade it has to be available when I need it. I unlocked the door, left it slightly ajar, then walked to my bedroom. From my position there I could see the door.

Harry Grant knocked and the door opened slightly.

I called, "Come in and lock it after you, Harry."

He stepped inside, pushed the door shut and locked it. When he turned around I had stepped out of the bedroom. I aimed the .38 at his chest and it produced the predictable result.

Grant's face lost color. "What are you doing, Darbash? It's me, Harry Grant!"

"Get your hands up, Harry. Let's see what you're carrying." I frisked him, then lowered my gun.

"I stopped wearing a gun years ago. The cops would fix me if they found a gun on me. You think I'm crazy, or something?" Grant protested.

"No. You're all right. Relax, take it easy. I didn't single you out. I make it a practice never to speak to anyone unless I know he's clean." I grinned. "I don't trust anybody, Harry. That's why I'm still in business."

"Yeah, I know that, but it shakes me every time I walk in here and you pull that gun on me. I've been here before. You ought to know

by now that I don't carry a gun."

"I do, but I don't know when you're going to start."

He smiled and his tiny eyes were almost obscured by the fat around them. He eased himself into a chair facing me and shook his head. "If anybody in the whole world would say that Harry Grant allowed himself to be frisked by a guy like you, I'd tell him that he was nuts."

"Believe it, Harry. Believe it," I said.

Harry Grant was about fifty-five. Balding, he combed the long black thin hair on the left side of his head all the way over to the right side, so that each strand stood out distinctly against his pink scalp. He wore an expensive, immaculately tailored suit. Grant, one of the top syndicate bosses, had bludgeoned and broken heads in his youth. Now he had the good life. Now all he wanted was peace of mind. That's why he came to me.

I said, "Do you want some coffee, Harry?"

He shook his head, "I didn't come here for that, Darbash."

"I know," I said.

He hesitated. "You know Joe Lafayette."

It was a statement of fact. "I know him," I said. "Have some coffee, Harry. You'll feel better."

"I'll feel better when I know that you're going to take care of Lafayette. That's why I came here."

"Sure, Harry. Why not?"

"What's it going to cost me?" he asked.

I thought about Joe Lafayette. He was about sixty. He was a product of the New Orleans slums. He'd hammered his way to a top position in the narcotics crime hierarchy. He'd traveled a long way from the youth who'd been busted for hustling small shopkeepers. When he got out he pushed narcotics and finally worked himself up to retailing and wholesale distribution. He became a top man in the syndicate. When the federal boys applied heat he'd invested in legitimate businesses. Today Joe Lafayette had money, power, connections, two bodyguards.

Nobody in his right mind would attempt to knock off Joe Lafayette, because an attempt, whether successful or not, would meet with instant retaliation.

I said, "Fifty thousand, Harry."

He roared, "You're crazy, Darbash! You asked forty grand for the last job."

"You got a bargain."

"What kind of a bargain is forty thousand dollars?" he growled out of the side of his mouth.

"When it was over was there

anybody who could point a finger at you as the guy who ordered him hit?"

"No."

I said, "You and your boys all had an alibi. You were all in the clear. That makes it a bargain, Harry. You didn't have any trouble."

He nodded. "We've got a deal. Fifty grand. When are you going to do it?"

"Don't worry about it, it'll be done, Harry. You pay your money and a guy gets knocked off. What more do you want? Description? Details? Forget it. I don't operate that way."

He laughed. "A guy shells out fifty thousand dollars and you'd think he'd be entitled to know how he was spending his money."

I winked. "You know how you're spending it, but you still haven't told me why you want me to make a stiff out of a live one."

He pointed a finger at me and shook his head. "Where do you get off, Darbash? How does it figure that a guy like you has to know the reasons?" He smiled but there was no mirth on his face. "It confuses me."

"It does more than confuse you, Harry. It steams you. You can't understand it. You've hired a professional murderer for big money. So you start thinking that the man

he's going to murder is all he has to know. That's it, isn't it, Harry?"

"That's the way I see it," Harry said.

"That's the way you see it, but not me. I've got to know why it's worth fifty thousand dollars to you."

"What you don't know can't hurt you, Darbash."

"I see it the other way."

He shook his head wonderingly. "I could have this job done for a fraction of the money I'm paying you."

I said nothing.

"All right. Joe Lafayette is a great concern to me and to other top people in the outfit. He's ambitious. He's money hungry and he keeps taking chances. He does crazy things. He acts on his own and when he does he puts us all in a very dangerous position with the cops."

"I don't buy it. Nobody is going to shell out fifty grand for a reason like that. If his boys took a fall they'd keep their mouths shut. So what makes it worth fifty big ones to put Lafayette to sleep?"

He sighed. "You know we don't have anything to do with narcotics."

I shrugged, said, "Sure."

"No, we don't fool with that," Harry said. "Not anymore. You play with that kind of stuff and

the federal government doesn't give you any rest. They watch your movements. They check your background, your business investments and the people you associate with. They don't get off your back."

I said, "Sure."

"You get careless. You get greedy, and they fall on you like a ton of bricks. The government's rough. They're handing out twenty year sentences for each count. The Feds are managing to get two and three count indictments." Harry grimaced. "The boys on top are too old to play that kind of game. Like that you can die in prison. We got out of it."

"You mean importing it," I said. "Let's make it clear."

He nodded. "Yeah, but the chance to make big dough keeps Lafayette in. He takes 'one shot' deals from time to time. Federal agents, United States attorneys and people in the District Attorney's office know about him doing it. They haven't enough evidence to touch him yet, but sooner or later he's going to take a fall. It figures. When that happens he's going to make a deal with them and he's going to name names. He isn't going to let them put him away for years. He'll talk. He's a threat to us."

"That's better, Harry. That's

more like it." I grinned. "When I finish with him he won't be a threat. Now that's worth fifty grand."

"When are you going to do it?" he asked.

"Leave that to me. A week, two weeks, maybe a month. The time has to be right."

He was watching me intently. "I'll send someone around tomorrow with the money."

"Wrong. You deliver it personally. No bills larger than twenties. We don't want to give advance notice to the world that we're going to knock somebody off, do we, Harry?"

I thought I saw Grant shudder. Harry was getting soft.

"I'll bring it tomorrow," he said.

Twenty years ago he would have killed Lafayette himself. He rose and started to leave.

I said, "This fifty thousand dollars—you paying the money yourself, or is it a group expenditure?"

"All of us," he said brusquely, "although I had to work to convince them that Lafayette is a threat." He stared past me. "He's

got them frightened, but finally they all agreed after somebody suggested that I give you the job. It was hard to convince them. I had to keep telling them how Lafayette could get us all sent up if he took a fall. You can't take chances with somebody like that. He can put your life in jeopardy.

"I'll see you tomorrow," he said, and began walking toward the door again.

The silencer held the noise down when I shot and killed him. I opened the windows and switched on the fan to get rid of the cordite fumes. Then I walked over and stared at Harry Grant. He'd lost his nerve. He'd grown soft, like a fat cat. That made him dangerous, a threat to everybody.

I called the syndicate number and said, "I want to ship a steamer trunk."

"That's fine." I recognized Joe Lafayette's voice immediately. "We have a trunk in the area. We'll be there in ten minutes," he said.

I hung up, got the steamer trunk from the closet and started packing Harry Grant for shipment.



Though seldom obvious, there are occasions when it may be expedient to remain a debtor.



LISTEN, Mr. Stoneman," the voice said, "I hear someone is paying big money to take care of a guy named Scott who works at the airfield. You told me once he was a friend of yours, right?"

My doodling fingers started to sketch a skull and crossbones on my note pad. Unlikely as it was that anyone would want to kill

Scott, the gasping, pitch-changing, sniff-punctuated voice was never known to be wrong.

"Tell me who, Snuffles," I said.

"Don't know. I owe you a favor. I'm paying. That's it. You take it from here, man." The phone went dead.

I leaned back in my chair, nerves in my stomach knotted into a tight ball. Indian summer had come to the city, the sun turning the perpetual haze to a warm golden mist and until Snuffles called, it had been a leisurely, enjoyable day. Now I had to move and move fast, and I felt like a blind man dropped suddenly into an unfamiliar room.

A pigeon chandelled to my window sill, cocked its head at me for a few seconds, decided a worried looking, stony-faced, middle-aged attorney wasn't the type for a handout and tumbled from the sill with wings spread. I watched it wheel gracefully down.

Twenty-two years before on a

By Stephen Wasylyk

similar hazy sunny afternoon, I had wheeled down as gracefully and stupidly as that pigeon, and George Scott had blown an ME-109 off the tail of my fighter, a debt I never had a chance to repay. If Snuffles Grogan owed me a favor for keeping him out of jail, I sure as hell owed one to Scott for something far more important.

I punched the button on my private outside line and dialed Scott Flying at the municipal airfield.

Scott's voice was amused. "The operator says you're John Stoneman, but I don't believe her. Used to know a John Stoneman, but haven't talked to him for at least a year. I think an irate husband shot him."

"The woman you married doesn't want her husband associated with a disreputable bachelor," I reminded him. The skull and crossbones on my note pad stared up at me. "How are things there, Scott? Anything new?"

"Hell, no. Same routine day in, day out. If the weather is good we fly. If it isn't we go home and I worry about how much money I'm losing."

"Nothing unusual there at all?"

"What do you call unusual?" Scott's voice was puzzled.

"Anything happen in the last week that never happened before?"

"Yeah," he said. "Some idiot

wanted to buy me out. Fat chance. I've spent twenty years building this thing and now that it's clear, I can sit back and enjoy it without working hard."

"Who wants to buy?"

"Don't know. The offer was made through a lawyer named C. J. Matthews, a fat little bald head with shifty eyes."

"I know the one you mean. Anything else unusual?"

"I made a profit last week even though the weather was bad."

"Don't go away. I'll be back to you."

"Hey, wait a minute," he yelled. "You can't call me once a year, ask a lot of fool questions and hang up!"

"Sure I can," I told him. "Listen." I broke the connection and buzzed for my secretary.

"Get an attorney named C. J. Matthews on the phone for me," I told her.

I sat back to think. Scott was an easy-going, popular man, a war hero rewarded by the city a long time ago with a long term lease for operating his flying service at the city's airfield, a hard working, sober citizen who made as unlikely a candidate for a killing as anyone I knew.

My phone buzzed and I introduced myself to Matthews as Scott's attorney. He wasn't at liber-

ty to reveal the name of the client interested in Scott Flying and the offer was no longer open. I mentally scored one for Stoneman, knowing a legitimate offer would never have been withdrawn so quickly.

The desk clock crept past three-thirty. Pushing my chair back, I headed for the office next to mine. Matthews couldn't tell me who his client was but there was nothing to prevent me from finding out on my own.

I knocked gently and opened the door. The old gentleman had spun around to face the window and the warm sun, slid down a little in his chair, folded his hands across his stomach and fallen asleep. I tapped his shoulder.

One eye opened. "You cannot prove beyond a reasonable doubt I was asleep."

"I can make a rather strong case."

His name was Martin Chetkos and he had taken me direct from law school and taught me everything he knew about criminal law, which was considerable. As a reward for my learning well, he had made me his partner and let me do all the work while he rested his seventy year old bones in his soft leather chair and criticized.

"C. J. Matthews of Matthews, Crane, etcetera, etcetera," I said.

"Blame him for it, Big man?"

"Big man."

"Client would have to be important for him personally to approach a friend of mine with an offer to buy his business, right?"

His eyes narrowed, flickering with interest. "It would be reasonable to suppose it would be the firm's most important client, a man named Bessinger. He tried to buy your friend's business?"

"That's the assumption." I told him about Snuffles Grogan's phone call and my conversation with Scott.

He straightened and rubbed his nose, an automatic gesture when he was pleased or excited. "I believe your assumption is valid. Get your hat. My man shall drive us. I refuse to ride in that wire-wheeled, uncomfortable, flamboyant foreign atrocity you call an automobile."

"Where are we going?"

"To see Scott. I believe he is in trouble but, since he's your friend, he probably won't listen to you. He will listen to me, and I refuse to tell the same story twice."

During the half hour ride he sat with a ghost of a smile on his face, once murmuring something that sounded like everything comes to him who waits.

In Scott's office, Chetkos was almost rude, taking over Scott's chair, brushing conversation aside,

hands clasped on top of his cane, fingers drumming restlessly. He motioned to me.

"Tell Mr. Scott why we're here."

I told him. Scott laughed.

Chetkos held up a wrinkled finger. "Do not laugh, Mr. Scott. Mr. Stoneman's source is reliable. Someone intends to kill you. Have you ever met Mr. Bessinger?"

Scott shook his head.

"Think, Mr. Scott. Bessinger is a very short man with straight black hair, close set black eyes, a high pitched voice and looks your age although he is twenty years older. He always wears dark gray clothing."

Scott snapped his fingers. "The little guy last week." He looked at me. "Remember I told you the weather was bad? It was closed in so tight one morning nothing was moving, but he wanted me to fly him someplace. I tried to explain I couldn't even find the end of the runway, but I might as well have been talking to the wall. He kept telling me to name my own price."

"What did you say to him, Mr. Scott?" Chetkos sounded as if he knew the answer.

"What could I say? I told him he was insane."

Chetkos let out a long sigh. "I knew it had to be something like that. Let me tell you about Bessinger, Mr. Scott. The Bessinger

family has a long history of mental illness. His father was committed to a sanitarium and his mother killed herself while he was still a young boy. He grew up being called Crazy Bessinger. One day he fought with and killed another boy who called him that. It was listed as accidental manslaughter. Twenty years ago his wife died under circumstances never fully explained."

The Indian summer day was almost gone, clouds blotting the sun and through the office window it suddenly looked cold.

"There have been many stories through the years," the old man went on quietly. "Unsubstantiated, of course. I will tell you one, since the situation is similar. Bessinger and I once belonged to the same club. One night in a heated political discussion, a man called Bessinger 'insane.' Within a few days, he received an offer to buy his company. It was so attractive he couldn't refuse, but he never collected the full amount agreed upon. It developed Bessinger was the buyer. He simply refused to pay, forcing the man to take him to court, which was what Bessinger wanted. He could afford to tie him up in litigation for years and he did. Five years later the man finally won the judgment. The next night he was killed by a holdup

man as he walked across a parking lot."

"Are you telling me that this man goes around killing people who call him insane?" Scott was skeptical.

"I am telling you that things happen to people who call Bessinger insane."

"How can he get away with it?"

"Planning and money," said Chetkos. "Mr. Stoneman will tell you there is a huge gap between suspicion and proof."

"Oh, come on, Mr. Chetkos. If what you say is true, he'd be responsible for a great many murders. I find that hard to believe."

"I did not say it was necessary for Bessinger to kill these people," said Chetkos. "Many times I am sure he was content with merely ruining them. But even if he had killed them, it shouldn't amaze you. You read the newspapers. You know there have been instances where a person with no apparent reason kills six or eight or twelve innocent people. Is Bessinger so much different?"

Scott shook his head. "I still can't believe it."

"Take your case, Mr. Scott. We believe Bessinger intends to have you killed, yet he has voiced no overt threat, performed no overt act to make you even suspect him. Suppose an accident happened to

you. Who would connect it with a man you spoke to for only a few minutes, a man whose name you didn't even know?"

Scott said nothing.

"You see?" Chetkos asked gently. "Now you believe me."

"What do I do? Call him and apologize? Call the police?"

"Neither. An apology would be ignored and in any event, the wheel has been set in motion. The police can't help because no crime has been committed."

"The man ought to be put away," Scott muttered.

"For forty years, Mr. Scott, I and a few others have been looking for someone to provide the reason and to sign the papers."

"So I walk around like a tin duck in a shooting gallery waiting for someone to knock me off," Scott said quietly.

Chetkos turned to me. "I assume your analytical brain has been functioning?"

"To some extent," I said. "First, if Bessinger has hired someone, the chances are he has stipulated it must look like an accident. He wouldn't want an out and out killing and investigation. Second, even though it would be logical to cause Scott to crash while flying, there are three big things against it. He'd need a specialist, the FAA would become involved, and most cer-

tainly the city would take an interest because Scott operates from city property. I think we can rule out anything happening around here or connected with flying as being too dangerous for Bessinger. Third, the other fixed base from which Scott operates and where he can be found is his home. I don't think the prospective killer will have either the time or the inclination to chase Scott around waiting for an opportunity. Therefore, I would say that he will go after him in his own house. Fourth, a logical projection would be that he will try soon since there is no point in waiting. Perhaps even tonight." I paused for breath. "Would you consider that a penetrating analysis?"

"Superficial at best," said Chetkos. "I personally do not think it will be tonight. Such haste is not characteristic of Bessinger."

He rose to his feet. "I see no reason for my continued presence. I suggest Mr. Stoneman stay with you tonight, Mr. Scott. He will take whatever precautions are necessary. Tomorrow we will arrange for more professional protection." He turned to me. "I hoped the opportunity to stop Bessinger would come while I was young enough to take advantage of it, but you will have to substitute. Trust no one. Bessinger has not survived so long

by being indifferent or stupid."

I walked with him to his car. The old man looked tired, the lines drawn tight on his seamed face.

"Suppose we use the same plan we developed under similar circumstances last year, if we need it," I said. "You'll arrange for my gun to be sent to Scott's house? I'm getting too old for this sort of thing. I'll need some solid support."

The old eyes probed at me. "Are you certain you can handle it? While you do have a talent for violence, I would not wish to use it to satisfy my own desire to trap Bessinger. We can take Mr. Scott to my place tonight and arrange for a bodyguard tomorrow."

I thought of the old debt I owed Scott. "I'm doing this for myself. If it were anyone but Scott, the law firm of Chetkos and Stoneman would behave like a law firm, instead of amateur detectives."

He snorted. "Amateurs, indeed. I would not like to think that any venture with which I am associated is tinged with amateurism."

I watched him go. Overhead, a sleek, twin engine plane drifted down the approach, hit the short alternate runway smoothly, slowed, taxied toward Scott Flying, swung neatly into line and Scott's son stepped out, evidently coming home from a charter flight.

A half-dozen people leaned against the wire fence in the gathering dusk, watching the planes. One of them looked at me, turned from the fence, walked to a car and pulled away. Something was vaguely familiar in the way he moved.

I was still trying to place him when I walked into Scott's office.

"You know, we're lucky," Scott said.

"That's an ironic statement if I ever heard one."

"Carol is out of town for a few days. Be back tomorrow evening."

"That makes things easier," I said. "All we need would be your wife asking questions."

A tall, twenty-year-old came through the door.

Scott waved at him. "You remember my son Bill."

I held out my hand. "The last time I saw him he was about fifteen and a lot smaller."

"Mr. Stoneman," the kid said said quietly. His grip was perfunctory, his eyes cold, his opinion of me probably taken from his mother.

"I'm taking off," he said to his father. "Angie and I have a date and I won't be home afterward. I'll be staying at her house so I won't have that long drive home."

"Okay with me," said Scott. "Need any money?"

A shadow passed over the kid's face. "No," he said shortly. "I'll see you in the morning."

I made sure he was gone before I said, "You're having trouble with him."

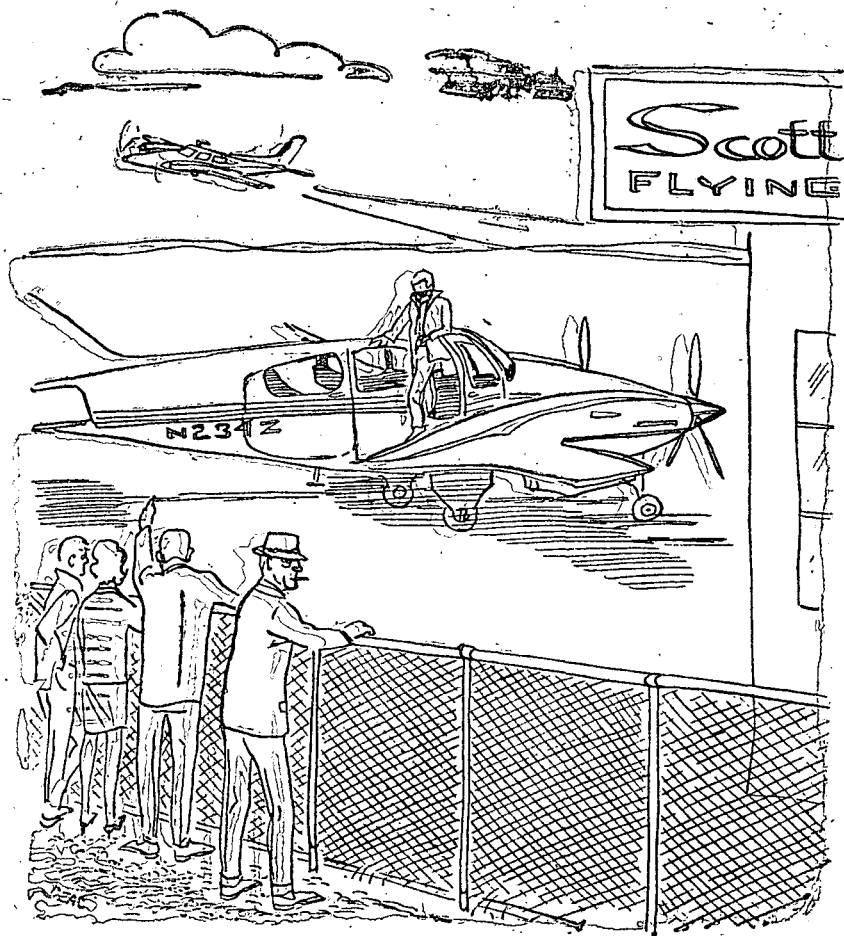
Scott nodded. "Ever since this girl Angie and a couple of her friends hired a plane to go back to college last spring, she's been leading him around by the nose."

"You sound as if you don't like her."

"I don't," he said slowly. "I'm not exactly poor but alongside her father I feel poverty stricken. The kid is out of his class. He was draining me dry trying to keep up with her and I had to put my foot down. I tried to tell him if she was any kind of a woman, she'd spend less of his money. But he doesn't see it that way, so naturally I'm the tight-fisted heavy in the case. Now what's the next step? A professional killer is supposedly after me and I have a lawyer for a bodyguard. What do you intend to do, throw law books at him?"

"You never know," I grinned. "That's what it might come down to. Let's have dinner and go home."

We carefully locked up Scott's house, closing the blinds and the drapes, leaving one window in a first floor bedroom unlatched. I wanted anyone trying to get in to use that window because I'd rigged



it with a homemade burglar alarm; some thumbtacks and a long piece of string running to a sheet of paper on the floor in Scott's den. If the window went up, the paper would move and Scott and I could get there faster than anyone could crawl in.

Chetkos' chauffeur had delivered a package, a short barreled .44 Magnum from my collection. Scott stared at it.

"Why do you need that cannon?"

"Intimidation." I checked it and carefully lowered the hammer on an empty chamber. "A friend on

the force once told me there were two weapons an experienced man would never challenge at close range: a sawed off shotgun because it is almost impossible to miss with one, and a heavy handgun because if you are only nicked, you get knocked off your feet. Anytime you fire this, you're playing for keeps. I hope I don't have to use it."

We filled the hours with talk of the days when we flew together and the years since, the talk tapering off when the clock passed midnight. Too little sleep the night before dragged my lids shut and I hovered just under wakefulness, blind but not deaf, hearing familiar sounds, friendly sounds, none bringing the gut-wrenching quiver that would tell me someone was trying to break in. Scott slumped at the desk, staring at the paper, his regular hours as a married man making him more durable. I slipped a notch deeper into sleep, into a half dream world where I watched Scott, Chetkos and myself acting out our parts, where Scott refused to believe any of it and I yelled at him that Chetkos knew what he was doing and twenty years practice of criminal law had taught me people like Bessinger could exist, that they thought nothing of hiring someone like Deeker Jensen.

I snapped awake, bringing the name out of the dream with me, knowing now why the man I had seen leaning against the fence at Scott Flying that afternoon looked familiar.

Deeker Jensen. I had seen him once, pointed out in a downtown bar; a name for hire, an expensive professional perfect for someone like Bessinger.

There was no sensible reason for Deeker Jensen to be at that fence except to get a line on Scott. I dialed Chetkos and told him.

"I shall keep Mr. Jensen in mind if anything happens to you," he said.

"You'd better do more than that," I told him.

Scott motioned frantically, pointing at the sheet of paper moving slowly across the floor.

"Here we go," I said softly. "Are you ready?"

I heard a click as Chetkos turned on his tape recorder. "Go ahead," he said.

I placed the receiver down without hanging up and motioned Scott across the heavy rugs to the bedroom window. If Scott had any doubts left, they were gone now, belief accented by the hard lines in his face, dim in the light filtering into the bedroom. We heard the window sliding upward and the soft clicking as the blind followed.

A cat yowled suddenly in the quiet night, a baby-in-pain scream that froze my blood and made my heart stutter, and I damned all cats born since the beginning of time.

The drape bulged as someone pulled himself through. Gauging where the head should be, I smashed down with the Magnum and tore the drape aside, gun lifted to smash down again if I had to. The night air rushed in, cool against my clammy face. He was draped across the sill, unmoving. I grabbed his collar and lifted.

Even in the dim light, it wasn't hard to recognize Bill Scott.

Scott cut loose with a few choice words as I helped him carry the kid into the den and drop him into a soft chair.

"You could have killed him," Scott said angrily.

I shook my head. "Not through that drape, but if he makes a habit of climbing through windows, he will get killed."

I was standing behind the chair when the kid stirred, looked up at his father and cursed. "You old fool. Just because I forgot my keys, did you have to brain me?"

If he had been my son, I'd have promptly brained him again.

"Not him," I said. "Me."

The kid spun around, held his head and groaned. He jerked a thumb at me. "What's he doing

here, hitting people like that?"

Scott looked at me questioningly. I shook my head.

"We were just talking about old times," I said. "Heard someone sneaking in the window and took no chances. How were we to know it was you? You weren't supposed to be home tonight, remember? Why are you here?"

"If it's any business of yours, Angie and I had an argument so I decided not to stay there. Anything wrong with that?"

"You feel all right, son?" Scott asked gently.

"Except for a headache," he snapped. "I'm getting myself a drink." He headed for the liquor cabinet.

"A drink will make that headache worse," I told him.

"You shut the hell up, Stoneman! You have no business being here!" If he had looked at me with disdain this afternoon, he glared at me now with hate.

"Why not?" I asked mildly. "What difference should it make to you?"

He turned quickly, a long barreled revolver fitted with a silencer in his hand. "This difference. Now I'll have to kill you, too."

Scott, the blood gone from his face, eyes dark, stared at his son, and I'd have given everything I owned to change things, to have

had Deeker Jensen crawl in that window.

"Easy, kid," I said softly. "Sons like you don't run around killing their fathers. Would you mind telling him why the thought even entered your head? You owe him that much."

The kid's eyes shifted, perspiration pouring down his face. Living with the thought had made him believe it would be easy; finding both of us here had thrown him off stride.

"Money? Is that it?" I threw the words at him gently. It wouldn't take much to set him off.

"Yeah, money," he said horasely. "His will leaves the business to me. I sell it. It's that simple."

"Not easy to sell a business like that."

"I already have a buyer."

"Take it from a lawyer, kid. You have nothing unless it's on paper and signed."

"I have the man's word."

"You have nothing," I said flatly. "Going to take him to court if he backs out? Say you killed your father because the man promised to buy the business from you and then didn't?"

"No reason for him to back out," the kid said contemptuously. "He could buy Scott Flying out of petty cash."

I had to pry the name out of the

kid somehow and at this pace we could go on all night.

"Forget it, Bill," I told him. "You're not killing anyone."

The kid grinned tightly. "I still have this gun."

"Don't move, kid," I said wearily. "Just look down alongside this chair. You'll see a .44 Magnum pointed at your belt buckle and if you look real close you'll see I have the trigger pulled up and the hammer held back. If your finger twitches, my thumb slips off the hammer and you get it. There's no way to beat me, and this gun will remove a healthy part of your anatomy no matter where you get hit."

"You could miss," he said shakily.

"Not likely, but if I do, that open phone line is going to hang you."

The kid's eyes widened when he saw the phone off the hook.

"Use your head," I said. "The idea was to kill your father, make it look like a burglary, discover the body in the morning, and back it all up with the fake alibi that you were at your girlfriend's house—if you were capable of doing it, which I doubt. It's all down the drain, so drop it."

Scott hadn't moved, the shock still pinning him to the floor. The muscles played along the kid's jaw for a moment and I let my thumb

slip a little, then his shoulders slumped and he let the gun fall. I took a deep breath and gently lowered the hammer and released the trigger.

"You really didn't want to kill him," I said gently. "It takes more than money for someone like you. It takes passion or hate or anger and you don't have enough of any of them. The girl is pulling at you from one side and twenty years is pulling at you from the other. If you really want money that badly, you know damn well he'd sell the business and give you every penny. You've been enough of a fool for one night so tell me whose idea it was in the first place."

There was a long silence. "Bessinger," he said finally.

I walked over and picked up the phone. "You get it?" I asked Chetkos.

"Every word, but it isn't much good. Any boy who would consider killing his father obviously needs a psychiatrist, so no jury is going to take his word against a pillar of the community like Bessinger. How did you know it was the boy?"

"I bashed the kid in the head while he was climbing in the window. When we carried him in here, I felt the gun."

"Fantastic," he said. "Bessinger has an uncanny talent for choosing

the right man. How do you think Jensen fits in?"

"Coincidence, I guess."

"Don't be too sure. He just might have hired Jensen in the event the boy couldn't go through with it."

I looked across the room. Scott had retreated behind the desk and was lighting a cigarette with shaking hands. The kid hadn't moved. I had the feeling he didn't even know where he was.

"I'm going to leave these two to work out their own problems, if it's all right with you. Scott's going to need a doctor for the kid and I'd just be in the way."

"My only concern now is Jensen."

I sighed. "Okay. If I can stay awake long enough, I'll look around outside just to please you."

"Excellent. While you are not the greatest attorney in the world, you would have made quite an adequate police officer."

I grinned, told him to hang on, unlocked the back door, let my eyes become accustomed to the night and started pussyfooting around the house, feeling ridiculous. When I told Chetkos I was getting too old for this sort of thing, I wasn't joking. Fighting with words was a great deal easier and much less dangerous. I paused at the corner. Starlight was enough

to show the curved walk leading to the street, the symmetry of the shrubbery on either side broken by an indefinite dark shape some thirty feet away. I crouched, braced the Magnum against the house, sighted in as well as I could on the shape and cautiously called, "Jensen?"

The shape moved, a yellow finger poked at me and a slug ricocheted off the stone house above my head.

I hesitated. The last thing in the world I wanted to do was cut loose with that Magnum in that residential neighborhood. If I missed, there was no telling where that slug would end up.

Jensen solved my problem for me. Another slug whispered over my head, a few inches lower this time. I groaned and he moved forward to finish the job. I pressed closer against the wall, let him get half the distance and called softly.

"That's far enough."

He dropped, fired again, rolled, came up in a crouch and I fired. The Magnum went off with a deep *whoom*, the slug straightening him up and driving him off his feet, and from the way he fell, there was no point in rushing to look him over.

I came to my feet slowly, feeling sick, remembering now: Jensen had left the airfield after young Scott had stepped from the air-

plane; after seeing the man he'd come to see. So far as I knew, Scott himself had never left the office.

I brushed by Scott at the door and told Chetkos.

"Both of them," I said savagely. "He was going to kill them both. We thought Grogan was talking about Scott but he was really talking about his son. Do you realize how that madman set this up? If the kid killed Scott, and Jensen killed the kid, that would be ideal. If the boy didn't go through with it, Bessinger would still have punished Scott by having Jensen kill his son. He couldn't lose."

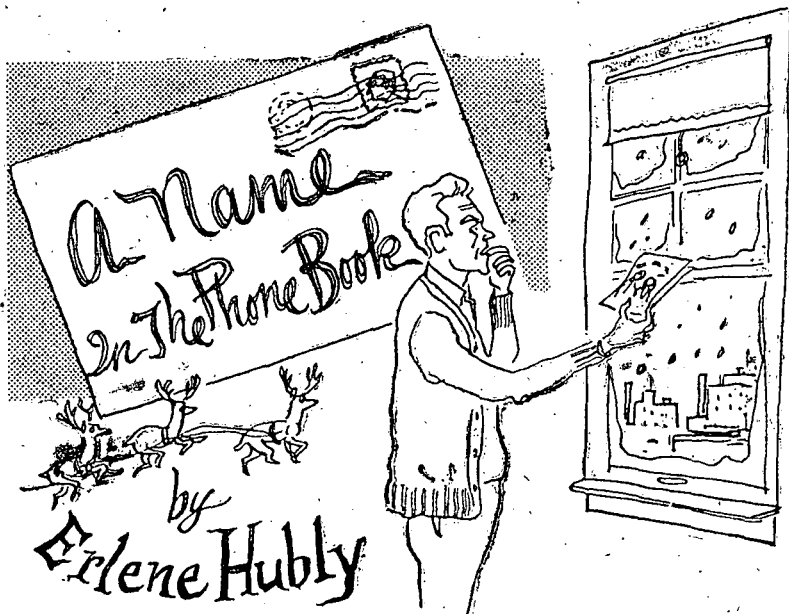
"But he did lose," said Chetkos gently. "Scott and the boy are still alive."

"The hell he did," I snapped. "They still have to live with the knowledge the boy just might have killed his father. You call that losing?"

Chetkos sighed. "Perhaps not. You had better hang up. The police will be there any moment, and you will need my presence to back up your story. I shall be there shortly."

I cradled the phone, feeling the shock and the pain still showing in Scott's face, wondering if I'd really done him a favor by saving his life; and knowing I'd never be content until I caught up to Bessinger, one way or another.

*"With the utterly lost, to whom life and death are equally jests,"
Poe wrote, "there are matters of which no jest can be made."*



IT HAD all begun because Jonathan, never able to remember anything associated with numbers, had ordered too many Christmas cards.

"How about—" his eyes went down the page, "—Madonna Orht?"

She did not laugh.

"Come now," he said. "You're not going to be difficult?"

She nodded that she was.

He turned some pages. "Fidelity Himmelfarb?"

Her mouth relaxed a little, but she did not smile.

"Mordecai Prune?"

She objected. "No one's got *Prune* for a last name! Let me see the book."

He had to admit that he had made it up.

It had taken them over two hours,

two hours of searching, of arguing—he kept making up fantastic names—of finding actual names and laughing over them till their mouths were stretched into one continuous and painful smile, to decide finally on a name: Ferd Lumpp.

Reaching for the card that was left, Patricia had commented that she was so laughed out she couldn't even tell anymore whether the name was funny. Jonathan reassured her that it was—that 'Ferd Lumpp' was the funniest name in the New York phone book.

"Do you think he'll like us?" Patricia asked, looking at the card. Jonathan was in a rented Santa suit; she in a red dress she had fringed with cotton. Eight reindeer formed a halo over their heads.

"He'll love us," Jonathan answered.

"What shall I write on the inside of the card?"

Jonathan leaned forward. This was to be the *real* joke. "Something important. Some kind of note, mysterious, like . . . 'don't forget the meeting next Wednesday night,' or . . . I've got it!" he cried. "Remember Miami?"

"What?"

"Write 'Remember Miami?' I mean, the guy'll get the card and wrack his brains trying to figure out what he's supposed to remem-

ber about Miami," he explained.

"What if he's never *been* to Miami?"

Jonathan laughed. "Everyone's been to Miami. Even a guy with a name like *Ferd Lumpp* has been to Miami."

"*You've* never been there!"

"Yeah, but my name's not Ferd Lumpp."

Patricia wrote the words.

"Shall I sign it with our real names?"

"Sure. Why not?"

Patricia addressed the envelope, then hesitated before writing the return address. Wanting to retain some anonymity, she wrote the address of a cabin her mother owned on the Cape, instead of their New York address. Then she threw the card on the stack with the others.

"Am I not a genius—or am I not a genius?" Jonathan asked her.

Getting up from the floor, going over to his chair and putting her arms around his waist, Patricia had to admit that, indeed, he was a genius.

Ferd Lumpp got the card on Wednesday. The names meant nothing to him, but the message did. Someone else had been there!

Going over to the window and holding the card up to the light, he tried to make out their faces. It was almost impossible to distin-

guish the features of the man. The white beard covered most of his face, the cap hid any signs of hair on his head, the cap tassel obscured his left eye and cheek. Only the right eye was clearly visible; a narrow dark slit, almost closed by laughter. Her face was somewhat easier to see, although her eyes were covered by wire-frame glasses, her hair by a white wig. In spite of the shadows drawn around her mouth, he could tell that she was young, probably in her early twenties. That might be enough.

Putting on a record by Beethoven—the Sixth was his favorite—he sat down and tried to remember the people who had been there. There had been the cashier in the drugstore. Certainly *she* had watched him. Every time he had glanced up from the book rack, she had been looking at him. She was not flirting with him—of that he could be certain. There had been no smile on her face, nothing suggestive in her manner, only eyes so relentless that he finally had to leave the drugstore. But that had been long before the beach. Why would she have suspected him then?

Beethoven was faster now, more desperate, the trumpets having joined in, and Ferd wondered if they had been the young couple he had seen outside the library. The girl had been waving a road map

in the air, arguing that she wanted to stay in Miami another day; her husband, quieter, that they had no money left. Certainly, *she*, in spite of her argument, had kept looking at him. Had she known? He had been to the beach by then. Were *they* the ones?

Or was Patricia the girl in the art shop who had sold him the tube of zinc white, the tube he had felt warm in his shirt pocket the whole time he had been with the girls—was she Patricia? She had even got him to speak of himself, to tell her that he was from New York. In retrospect, had this been friendliness, or just plain suspicion? Had he given himself away? Certainly he was nervous. The bag was in his room by then, and he had not yet thought of a way to dispose of it. Had she suspected him and told some lover or husband? Were *they* Patricia and Jonathan?

The trumpets were blaring now, and Ferd, getting up to turn off the player—he had a splitting headache—went over to the window. Looking down into the street, watching the people move below, he began to feel better. It did not matter if he could not remember which ones they had been since he had their picture, as well as a return address. It should be easy enough to find them . . .

Two days before, as they were

walking along the Hudson River near the University, Patricia had said suddenly, "It must be an abbreviation," and she posed in front of Grant's Tomb for Jonathan to take her picture.

He asked her to brush her hair out of her face, then said, "Abbreviation?" He did not know what she was talking about.

"Ferd," she said. "It must be short for Ferdinand."

He snapped the shutter, pulled the white sheet out of the camera. "Fifty seconds," he said.

They started walking again.

"It isn't really such a funny name," she went on. "Kings have been named that, haven't they? I mean, wasn't there some famous king named Ferdinand?"

"Ummmmm," he grunted, stopping to open the camera. Carefully, he peeled the picture away from its edges.

"And that bull," she continued. "Don't you remember, as a kid, that little bull that everybody wanted to grow up to be fierce, to fight in the bullring, and all he wanted to do was to be gentle, to smell the clover, to lope peacefully around the pasture . . ."

"Bulls don't lope," Jonathan corrected. "Horses do, but not bulls."

He had the picture out now. "Look," he said, holding it up. "You're beautiful."

She had to admit that he was right, and he cocked the shutter, ready to take another picture.

"Ferdinand isn't really such a funny name," she said again. "If you think about it for a while."

The following day, the day before Christmas Eve, while they were shopping in the delicatessen, she had begun again. Pushing her cart down the aisle, she suddenly stopped in front of the papaya juice.

"I feel guilty," she said.

"What?" He was wondering if she had got the smoked oysters yet.

"Being in here with him out there. He must be poor, terribly poor."

"Who's poor?"

"Ferd Lumppp."

"Darling," he sighed, "can't you think of anything else?"

"Well," she pouted, "even *you* will have to admit that isn't the *best* neighborhood he lives in. I mean, it's almost the worst."

He could not argue with her.

She did not buy the papaya juice, took the oysters back. For dinner that night they had fried eggs.

Then, on Christmas Eve, as Jonathan watched, Patricia paced around the apartment, grabbed a magazine and thumbed through it, put it down, straightened the angel on top of the Christmas tree. Finally, she paused in front of the bookcase where they had hung their

stockings—one for him, one for her—and she said, her voice excited, “We need a *third* one up here—a stocking for Ferd!”

Jonathan had found himself making a slight fist with his left hand. Damn Ferd Lumpp!

Patricia began to hum. Opening the hall closet door, she took a roll of red felt from the top shelf. “Why didn’t I think of it before?” she said; and began cutting out the shape of a stocking.

Watching her, hearing her hum, Jonathan slowly relaxed his left hand. He had not realized how lonely she had become. Lavishing on her all the attention that the late night hours provoked, he had forgotten that her day, while he was away at law school, contained many other hours. She had not learned how to use them.

Still humming, she held up the

stocking. “See, darling?” she said.

Suddenly overcome with affection for her, Jonathan smiled. “Beautiful,” he said, and his eyes flickered over her blonde hair. He would be graduating from law school in June; perhaps they should take a trip somewhere—maybe even to Hawaii. Then, when they came back, they would have to start thinking about having a baby...

The man in the camera shop had not been helpful.

“Are you kidding? That picture order could have come from any of a hundred photo shops or drug-stores in the city, any of three hundred processors in the country.”

The man who owned the grocery store on the outskirts of Falmouth had known a little more.

“Sure,” he had said. “That’s the old Lawson place.”



"Lawson?" he repeated, puzzled.
"Yeah—a widow. Has a daughter. Married recently."

"Patricia?"

"Yeah."

Ferd bit his lower lip. "Where is she now—Patricia?"

"Lives in New York, I think."

"Married name?"

"Uhhh . . ." He couldn't remember, didn't think he'd ever known, though. The Lawsons hadn't been out to their cabin in years—since Mr. Lawson died. Daughter been away at some fancy college.

"Mrs. Lawson—where is she now? New York?"

"Nope. Somewhere out on the West Coast."

"Los Angeles? San Francisco?"

"Yeah. One of those cities out there."

Ferd had taken the early morning bus back. Arriving in New York when there was still some light left, he had walked over to the park. Depressed, he sat down on a park bench.

Park benches: the story of his life.

He could hear a couple coming down the path, the girl laughing. He moved uncomfortably against the hard wood of the bench. *Why must night always come?* he thought. *The worst time of all.* The couple was passing in front of him now, the girl still laughing. Her

head was thrown back, twilight falling across her throat. Why must everything always remind him that in a world where everything was made for two, he was only one?

It had been that way in Miami, a succession of park benches, loneliness, night always coming, couples, everything made for two. So he had done the only things he knew how to do: spent hours before the drugstore bookracks, sat on park benches, wandered through the art store, trying to decide which tube of oil paint to buy, talking to the owner—and then he had wandered out onto the beach, where he had found the girls.

The lights in the park were on now. Getting up, Ferd started walking down the path. Sometimes he had trouble remembering; sometimes his mind refused to work. Sometimes he couldn't even remember if he had done it or not.

Coming out of the park, he went into the corner drugstore. Standing in front of the books, he began to turn the squeaking rack, looking at the titles: *In Cold Blood*, *Three Ways to a Thinner You*, *The Valley of the Dolls*, *Five Ways to Find God*. He started to reach for *In Cold Blood* but as his arm went up, he saw the cashier was looking at him, scowling almost. He'd better not risk it. Lowering his arm, he turned the rack again. She was still

watching him. He would have to leave the store.

Walking out of the store, he started remembering again. There had been the bookrack and then the art store and then the beach where he had found the girls, camping out in their sleeping bags. He had stopped and tried to talk to them, his voice hesitant, stumbling, finally incoherent. *Why was it so important—such a victory—for me to talk to strangers, as if by talking to them I was proving to myself that I could make friends, after all?* He could not remember their faces, anything the girls had said. Had he really found them there, had it all happened, the horror that followed? Or had his craziness made him lonely, causing him to invent the whole thing? He could not be certain. Yet there had been the laundry bag—of that he was certain—and *they* had seen him do it.

He was on his street now, walking toward his room. He would find them. If he had to go to all one hundred of those photo-shops, all three hundred of those processing centers, if he had to camp outside that cabin till spring came, he would do so—until he had found them, Patricia and Jonathan.

Early in the new year Jonathan had mentioned the trip.

"Hawaii?" she beamed. It was

perfect. On the way out they could stop off and visit her mother, who lived in Los Angeles.

Characteristically, Patricia became absorbed by the idea. Sitting down to the dinner table, she would place an orchid lei around Jonathan's neck, then begin the meal with a fruit drink served in a scooped-out pineapple. Another evening, she would greet him at the door, wearing something she called a "mumu." Did he think she could wear it over on the plane? Another night, surrounded by maps, she would plan their trip, running her finger from Los Angeles across the Pacific Ocean to Honolulu. Why didn't they sail over, then fly back? And did Jonathan know that Tahiti, Guam, even Japan were close by?

Jonathan had known. Getting up from the chair where he had been trying to read his law book, he stood above her and her maps.

"It's going to cost a hell of a lot, isn't it?"

She reached for a piece of a paper. "The man at the travel agency said two to three thousand, if we go all the way to Japan."

He sat down on the floor beside her. "The trip means a lot to you, doesn't it?"

She looked at him. "Well, *you* were the one who suggested it. I thought *you* wanted to go, too."

"I do," he said slowly. "Maybe your Mother could . . ." His voice trailed off.

Somewhat angered, wondering why Jonathan was always so impractical, always so ready to suggest things he knew he could not carry out, she folded the map. She did not mention the trip for several days.

Then, the following Sunday afternoon, as they were walking along the river, she spoke of the trip again. "I don't think we should go."

He looked at her.

"I've been selfish. We can't afford it. I mean," she went on, "Hawaii is what we *will* become—after you've been practicing law for a while. Then maybe we'll be Hawaii. But now, it's more like we were . . ." She was searching for a comparison.

"The Staten Island ferry?" he offered.

Smiling, she nodded yes, and they walked along in silence.

"Still," she finally sighed, "Hawaii would have been nice."

Moving closer, he put his arm around her waist. He would tell her of his plan.

"Vassar? Mt. Holyoke?"

The grocer could not be sure.

Ferd tried again. "Did she go to Radcliffe? Sarah Lawrence?"

He nodded his head—never could keep those colleges straight.

Ferd sighed. The mother—was he sure she lived in either San Francisco or Los Angeles?

"Pretty sure."

Ferd thought a minute. It might be easy enough to find her by calling all the Lawsons in both cities.

The grocer smiled. If he weren't in such an all-fired hurry, he might be able to see them that summer. They might be coming out—June, July. They had called the local carpenter and asked him about something—the roof of their cabin, he believed.

Ferd bit his lower lip. "Local carpenter?"

"Yeah, Benji Burns. He might be able to help you."

Ferd smiled. The carpenter, indeed, might be able to help him.

At the last minute Patricia had balked. "What if it rains?"

Jonathan laughed. He hoped it would. They could catch the water in buckets and pans, put tarps over the furniture. It would always be those funny little hardships that they would remember.

She wasn't sure it would be so funny. He knew what a light sleeper she was, and with all that water dripping into all those pans . . .

"I thought that's what you wanted—something simple, inexpensive,

maybe even a little inconvenient."

"But not all that dripping," she pouted.

"You *will* have fun," he promised. "I'll entertain you day and night—walk through the sand on my thumbs, dance across the roof on my toes, take a bath in one of those drip-pans—make you laugh."

She did not smile.

"You'll see," he said, kissing her still-pouting lips. "It'll be the best vacation we'll ever have."

She hoped he was right.

He had come upon the couple at dusk, the boy roasting marshmallows over a dying fire, the girl stuffing the remains of a picnic into a large paper bag. It was already too dark to make out their faces, but they seemed to be young. They were almost a mile up the beach from the cabin, though, so they might not be the ones he wanted. He would have to wait for some names.

He waited for over an hour, crouched behind a dune, nervous, listening to their soft words coming

up from the fire. At times the ocean was too loud; at times the noise in his own brain drove out all other sounds; at times he could catch phrases or words, but never any names. Then, as he was about to go down to them anyway, he saw the girl jump up.

"Look," she said, pointing to the moon that was just beginning to rise over the horizon, "it's orange!" She started running toward the water, calling, "Jonathan, Jonathan, let's go greet the moon!"

The boy stood up.

"Moon, moon, welcome moon!" she cried.

Ferd took a deep breath. They were both running toward the water now, laughing. As before, it would be a perfect place: the ocean, loud enough; the water, wet enough.

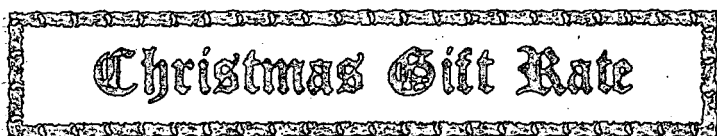
He started toward them. He would use the gun on the boy, save the knife for the girl—as he had done before—and he would be safe. There would be no one left to link him to what had happened in Miami.





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Too, according to fable, dogs drink at the river Nile running along, that they may not be seized by the crocodiles.



EDDIE ADAMSKI was not happy either in his work or in his marriage. The former wasn't particularly demanding and it paid fairly well, but his boss happened to be his brother-in-law, and he frequently reminded Eddie that he had his job only because of that relationship, and treated him as though he were a mere messenger boy.

Eddie's marriage seemed quite happy; he was even envied by some of his male friends who saw only the surface manifestations. Nancy Adamski was still as strikingly beautiful after four years of marriage as she had been on their wed-

ding day, and in public she displayed a gay, charming, life-of-the-party personality.

In private she was sometimes quite pleasant too, but she could also be an unmitigated harridan. A good deal of their conversation in the privacy of their apartment was conducted at scream-level, but Eddie's biggest marital complaint was that Nancy was as fast with a buck as her brother was tight.

Long Jake Attila never let loose of a nickle he didn't have to, a characteristic which had been a shock to Eddie Adamski when he discovered it shortly after his and

Nancy's honeymoon. Eddie had naively assumed that becoming the brother-in-law of the king of New York City's numbers racket would automatically put him in clover for life. He knew in advance the salary of the job Long Jake rather condescendingly offered him would be only \$250 a week, of course, but it never occurred to him that a multi-millionaire such as Jake wouldn't throw in periodic bonuses so that his sister could live in proper style.

Jake never added a penny to the \$250, even at Christmastime. When Eddie complained to him that Nancy was driving him more deeply into debt by the day, Jake merely shrugged and suggested he put her on a budget.

Eddie's discontent deepened after he met blonde Hazel Zimmer. Hazel was neither as good-looking nor as vivacious as Nancy, but she had an even disposition and never got angry. She was also seven years younger than Nancy's twenty-eight, and she wasn't exactly unattractive. You had to be fairly presentable to get the job of hat-check girl at Madden's Supper Club.

That's where Eddie met her. As Ziggy Madden was one of Long Jake's wholesalers, the club was a regular weekly collection stop for Eddie. It started with just casual conversation each time he dropped

by the club, but he sensed almost at once that she found him attractive, which inflated his ego. Eddie had always regarded himself as rather an average guy, and during his thirty years of life Nancy had been the only girl prior to Hazel who exhibited acute interest in him.

He responded like a love-starved teen-ager. On his third visit to the club after Hazel started to work there, he got up nerve enough to ask if she would like him to stop back and run her home after she got off work. She accepted. Within a week they were lovers.

Mostly Eddie had to see Hazel in the daytime, because she worked from five p.m. until one a.m., and he couldn't get away from Nancy that late very often. As Hazel had her own flat and Eddie didn't have to account to Jake Attila for his time, so long as he got his work done, this wasn't really inconvenient. Not for Eddie anyway; Hazel wasn't too pleased with the setup.

"I never get taken anywhere," she complained with increasing frequency. "What I need is a boyfriend who can at least take me somewhere for a drink after work. The bars are still open for two hours after I get off, and I get lots of offers."

The implied threat upset Eddie terribly, because he was growing

fonder and fonder of the blonde Hazel. In order to appease her he made a rather wild promise which, at the time, he had no intention of keeping. He told her that, as soon as he accumulated a decent stake, he would leave Nancy and he and Hazel would run away somewhere together.

While this device was effective in preventing Hazel from looking around for another lover, eventually it began to wear thin. When some months had passed with no indication from Eddie that the promised flight was anywhere in the foreseeable future, Hazel started to demand a definite date.

The afternoon she told him he had one more week to come up with a specific plan for their elopement or they were through, Eddie Adamski suddenly decided he really meant the promise, but how do you save up an elopement stake when your wife spends more than you earn?

Eddie went home that evening determined to discuss economy with Nancy, but he found a brand-new combination color TV-record player-radio in the front room. Instead of kissing his wife hello, he screamed at her, "What in the hell is this!"

"Don't you dare shout at me!" she screamed back. "What in the hell's it look like?"

After glaring at her speechlessly for some time, he managed to get out in a barely controlled voice, "Like about a thousand dollars."

"Only nine hundred and ninety-nine, ninety-five," she told him. "And payments are only fifty a month for a little over two years."

Eddie dismissed the idea of economic discussion. It was a subject his wife didn't understand. His stake was going to have to come from somewhere other than savings, so he decided to be frank with Hazel. The next afternoon at her apartment he dumped the whole problem in her lap.

"All I want is to be with you," he told her, "but I want to be able to support you in style. We'd starve on what I could earn after I walk out of this job. Before Long Jake gave me a job I was a clerk in a store, and I'm not about to go back to that. We need a stake so that I can set myself up in business somewhere."

Hazel wasn't averse to being supported in style. She was pragmatic enough to know that when a couple tries to live on love alone, the love soon evaporates. Eddie having a substantial stake salted away when they eloped had been part of her dream. She went right to the heart of the matter with a practical suggestion.

"You'll have to steal it," she said.

He stared at her. "From whom?"

"From Long Jake. With all that money you handle, can't you knock some down?"

Eddie emitted a bitter laugh. "You don't know Jake's bookkeeping system. All that would get me is dead. I might walk off with a single day's take, but I doubt that I'd get very far even with that."

"How much is a single day's take?"

"It runs anywhere from ten to twenty thousand, depending on which wholesalers I'm scheduled to collect from that day and how heavy the play was the previous week. Almost never more than twenty grand."

"So isn't twenty thousand a stake?" Hazel asked, wide-eyed.

"You don't understand. If I was ever as much as an hour late bringing in the collection money, Jake would have his goons covering the airports, rail and bus stations immediately. Even if I managed to get out of town before they got to me, it wouldn't be enough of a start. Somewhere, before very long, Jake's boys would catch up with me, and that would be the end of Eddie."

Hazel looked disappointed. "How much of a start would you need to be safe?"

After considering, Eddie said, "At least a weekend, with a lot of

advance preparation. Like getting a passport under another name, for instance. With that much time I could take a train or bus to some other city, switch to the identity on the passport and fly to somewhere like Spain."

Hazel thought for some minutes. Presently she said, "Maybe we can work out some plan together. Just how big is this numbers operation?"

"I handle about eighty thousand a week on the average," Eddie said. "Roughly, about a hundred thousand dollars worth of numbers tickets move in all the boroughs each week. The wholesalers' commissions amount to ten percent, their runners get another ten percent. Mainly the runners are legit people outside of peddling numbers—shoeshine boys, elevator operators, owners of small delicatessens. The balance of approximately eighty grand I pick up and deliver to Long Jake. Of course, prize money and overhead have to come out of that; my salary, for instance, and all the goons he hires to keep wholesalers from deciding to buy from somebody else or go in business for themselves. I figure Jake still nets about two million a year."

Hazel emitted a small, envious sigh. "All that money! There must be some way to skim off some of it. Just exactly what do you do each

place you go to collect for Jake?"

"I deliver a supply of tickets for the next week and collect all the old unsold tickets, the stubs of all the sold tickets, plus the money taken in, less commissions. I give each wholesaler a receipt, which I make out in duplicate, for so many unsold tickets, so many ticket stubs and so much cash. At the end of each day I turn in the take, the unsold tickets, the stubs, and the duplicate copies of the receipts."

"Who checks your records?"

"Art Quigley, Jake's accountant. Soon as I report in. I have to wait until everything checks out. Quig has a record of the number of tickets each wholesaler had out, and every unsold one has to be turned back in. Any that are missing, there better be money in its place. There's no way to beat the system."

"I can see a flaw in it a mile wide," Hazel said. "What's to prevent you from collecting from a whole flock of wholesalers in advance of their normal collection dates and taking off before Jake finds out about it?"

Eddie chuckled without humor. "You think that possibility never occurred to Jake? He makes out my collection schedule and tells the wholesalers when to expect me. They're instructed not to turn over their takes on any other day without a personal okay from him."

Hazel said indignantly, "He's certainly not very trusting."

Eddie smiled at her. "Obviously with good reason," he said dryly.

When she caught the point of that remark, she had to smile too. "I suppose in his business he's surrounded by a lot of people who would cheat him if they could."

"Uh-huh. He wouldn't trust his own mother, let alone a mere brother-in-law. Just to safeguard himself even further against any knocking down I might try, he has Art Quigley make quarterly audits. Every three months Quig hits all the wholesalers and checks their records against the ones I've turned in."

Hazel pursed her lips and thought for some time. "There has to be some kind of loophole," she said finally. "I once read somewhere that there was no sure-fire defense against embezzlement in any accounting system. If we both think hard enough over the next few days, maybe one of us can come up with an idea."

Her tone relieved Eddie. It seemed to indicate that, now that they were making at least tenuous plans, her ultimatum of only a week to set an elopement date no longer stood.

It was Eddie who finally came up with the idea. When it hit him it seemed so simple, he was surprised

that he had worked at his job for four years without thinking of it before. He hurried over to Hazel's place to see what she thought of it. Hazel was enthusiastic.

"It's foolproof, darling," she told him, throwing her arms about his neck and giving him a big kiss. "You're so smart."

"Of course the plan won't pass the quarterly audit," Eddie said, "but the next one is only two weeks off. Then I'll have a full three months to skim off as much as is safe before we blow the country together. Can you wait that long?"

"As long as you keep piling up the stake," she told him, giving him another kiss.

While waiting for the two weeks to pass, Eddie made some necessary advance preparations. His first was to make a surreptitious check of the supply warehouse and note down the serial number sequences of the tickets scheduled to be distributed in the three-month period immediately following the coming audit. Then he took a sample ticket to a job printer he knew could keep his mouth shut and had him print over a million tickets bearing duplicate numbers.

The printing cost came to several hundred dollars, which Eddie didn't have. On the promise that he would return the money out of the first week's skim, he got Hazel to

withdraw every cent she had in the bank in order to meet the bill.

Eddie stored the supply of duplicate tickets at Hazel's apartment. After he had gone to a strange bank to rent a safe deposit box under an assumed name, he was ready to start operations.

The day following the quarterly audit, Eddie started to skim. He began cautiously, knocking down only a hundred dollars the first day and gradually increasing his take until he was skimming off an even five thousand a week. The drop in take brought comment from both Art Quigley and Jake Attila, but no apparent suspicion from either. Since Eddie's records continued to be in perfect order, they merely assumed there had been a temporary drop-off in sales, which happened occasionally for no discernible reason. After all, a five-thousand-dollar-a-week decrease in take was only slightly more than a six percent drop, which could be a normal fluctuation.

Each day after making his last collection, Eddie would hurry to Hazel's apartment. There he and Hazel would open the envelopes of each wholesaler, one at a time, and spread out the ticket stubs representing the tickets sold during the past week. They would remove a sequence of stubs representing about six percent of the wholesaler's

er's total sales, replace it with a sequence of duplicate tickets bearing the same numbers and skim off an equivalent amount of cash. Then Eddie would carefully make out another duplicate receipt to match the adjusted returns.

Of course some of the stubs Eddie collected had been sold only that day and were possible winners for the following day. They never substituted whole duplicate tickets for those, because it would have been disastrous for some player to produce a winning ticket bearing the same number as an unsold ticket turned in by Eddie. Any winners prior to the current day would have been paid off, so all of those turned-in stubs had to be losers. As soon as the master winning number, based on the Treasury figure appearing in the paper daily, was published, winners were paid off. Jake Attila had another man in charge of payoffs who delivered the prize money to wholesalers for distribution each day, and Eddie had nothing to do with this phase of the operation.

Until Art Quigley's next audit compared the wholesalers' records to those Eddie turned in daily, Eddie could see no way that he could be caught.

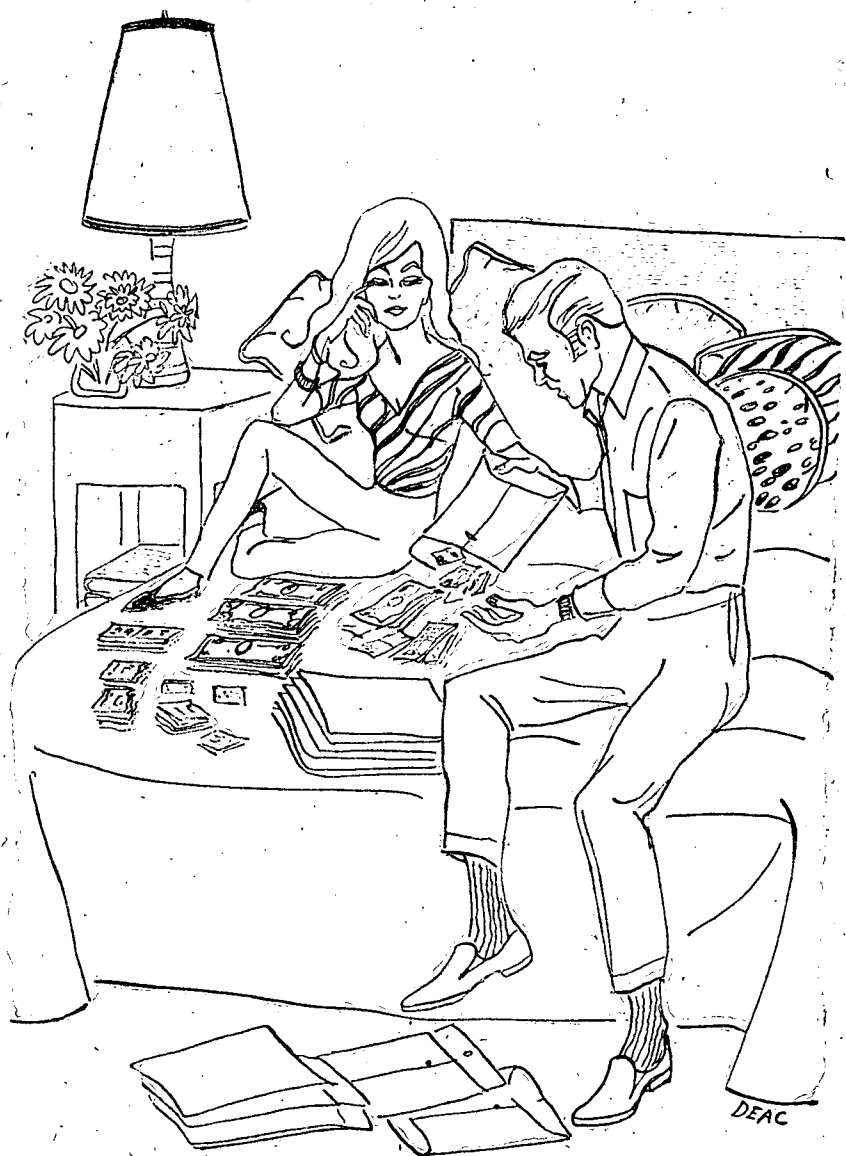
Once a week Eddie made a trip to the safe deposit box and stored away the week's skim. After the

first week, when he had used a portion of it to repay Hazel for what she had laid out for printing costs, it all went in.

While money accumulated in the safe deposit box, Eddie and Hazel made flight preparations so they would be all set when the time came. Eddie had to get away from home more than usual in order to complete these preparations, and for several weeks he worried about how he was going to manage this without exciting his wife's suspicion. Then Nancy's and Jake's mother solved the problem by getting sick. The widowed Mrs. Attila, lived in Buffalo, over four hundred miles away, and Nancy went to stay with her for two weeks.

This left Eddie free to do what had to be done. He started by taking Hazel over to Brooklyn and renting a furnished apartment in the Prospect Park area under the names of Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Hunter. They opened a small bank account at a Brooklyn bank and a couple of charge accounts in order to establish references, then applied for passports under their new names. Fingerprinting was no complication, because neither had ever been fingerprinted before.

Eddie completed arrangements by flying to Cleveland over the second weekend that Nancy was gone and buying two one-way tickets to Rio



de Janeiro. He figured that while Long Jake was certain to have his agents show his photograph to reservation clerks and stewardesses at all nearby airports, he wouldn't have airports as far away as Cleveland covered.

Eddie made reservations for a Saturday flight six weeks later, since that would take them to within a week of the next scheduled audit, and he didn't want to chance waiting any longer than that. He would have a cool fifty thousand dollars tucked away in the safe deposit box by then, and there was no point in risking last-minute apprehension by becoming greedy.

His plan, when he and Hazel finally took off, was to make some excuse to Nancy to get away for the weekend. He and Hazel would take a train to Cleveland on Friday night and catch their flight on Saturday. By the time Nancy realized he was gone for good, they would already be in Rio under their new names, with no trail behind them that Long Jake Attila could follow.

He hid the plane tickets beneath the handkerchiefs in his top dresser drawer, about the safest place in the house. Nancy, who sent their laundry out, never bothered to put his away for him when it came back. She merely piled it on his bed for him to handle himself, so she never opened his dresser drawers.

Nancy returned from Buffalo at the end of her two-week stay in an unusually cheerful mood. Her good spirits were only partly due to her mother's complete recovery from her illness, she told Eddie. Just the change in routine had been good for her.

"I ought to get up to Buffalo to see Mom more often," she said. "It's good for both of us, and I won't have the chance to see her for many more years. She's getting on."

"Go see her whenever you want," Eddie said generously. "I can take care of myself."

Nancy took advantage of his agreeableness to return to Buffalo the very next weekend. This time she stayed only a week, but two weekends later she flew back for another week. She began spending as much time in Buffalo as she did in Manhattan.

Eddie had hopes that she would be visiting her mother at the time he and Hazel took off, but the week before their scheduled elopement Nancy flew back from Buffalo and announced she planned to stick around and pay some attention to her husband for at least a couple of weeks.

Eddie began concentrating on an acceptable excuse for going out of town over the next weekend. Then Nancy's brother unknowingly handed him one.

On Tuesday, when Eddie turned in the day's collections, Art Quigley told him Jake wanted to see him in his office. Eddie found his brother-in-law behind his desk, studying a travel folder.

"Oh, hi, Eddie," Long Jake said, glancing up. "I got a chore for you. I want you should run over to the Duke Travel Agency on Broadway and pick up some flight tickets in my name. They're open until six."

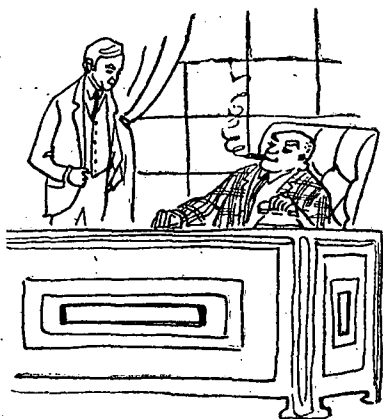
One of the things Eddie resented about his brother-in-law was that he constantly used him as an errand boy. Long Jake had a secretary who could perform such menial chores as this, but Attila seemed to get some kind of kick from making Eddie hop to his bidding.

Eddie didn't let his resentment show. He merely asked with simulated interest, "You going somewhere?"

"Me and Polly both. Miami for a couple of weeks. We leave tomorrow morning. Quig'll be in charge while I'm gone."

This was convenient, Eddie decided. Jake and his wife would be vacationing in Florida when he took off, which considerably simplified matters.

He ran over to the travel agency, picked up the tickets and delivered them back to the office. This got him home a half-hour later than usual, which would automatically



have meant a fight a few months back, but Nancy didn't seem in the least put out.

"I turned down the oven," she said after kissing him. "There's still time for a cocktail if you want one. What held you up?"

"Had to run an errand for Jake," he told her.

"He works you too hard," his wife sympathized.

Since her frequent trips to Buffalo began, Nancy's personality had mellowed so much that Eddie began to have some regrets about leaving her. He had no choice now, though. In a couple of more weeks Art Quigley's next audit would disclose the whole fraud, and there

was no way Eddie could change back the records he had turned in, even if he were willing to restore the money. Too, Long Jake Attila wasn't likely to regard restitution and a confession as extenuating circumstances.

Then, for the first time, it occurred to Eddie that Jake's leaving town in the morning gave him the excuse to be out of town over next weekend. He paused in the act of mixing a pair of cocktails to ask casually, "You know Jake and Polly are flying to Miami tomorrow?"

Nancy nodded. "Yes, he told me. He phoned just before you came in."

Eddie was momentarily sidetracked by this news. "Then how come he didn't tell you he'd sent me on an errand that would make me late?" he asked.

Nancy shrugged. "You know Jake. He couldn't care less about anyone else's inconvenience."

"Yeah, I guess." He poured from the shaker into twin glasses and handed her one. "He mention the weekend errand he's sending me on?"

"No. What's that?"

"He wants me to run up to Albany."

"Oh? What for?"

"Some payoffs that have to be made," Eddie said vaguely. "It's best you don't know anything about

that, because it's not exactly legal."

"All right," she said agreeably. "How long will you be gone?"

He might as well get as much advantage as possible, he decided. He also decided on a slight change in plans, since it was going to be so easy. He and Hazel might as well drive to Albany, or even farther, sell the car and then catch a train for Cleveland. It would make the trail just that much harder to follow.

"I'll drive up Friday evening and be back Monday morning," he told his wife.

Shortly after five p.m. Wednesday, when Eddie checked into the office with the day's collections at the usual time, he found dour Art Quigley alone. The accountant told him that Jake and his wife had arrived in Miami safely and Jake had phoned him from his hotel.

"He said to tell you to stick around home tonight in case he wants to reach you," Quigley said. "He may want you to arrange a horse bet for him. He has to check it out a little more first."

That could mean only one thing: Long Jake had wind of a fixed race somewhere. Jake Attila bet only on sure things. In the four years that Eddie had worked for him, Jake had only three times bet on horses, fifty thousand dollars each time, carefully spread among

bookies all over the various boroughs. All three races had been fixed, Eddie learned later—always later—until this time. Jake hadn't bothered to pass tips to his brother-in-law that the races were fixed. Eddie hadn't placed a cent on any of them.

Eddie hoped Jake would phone from Miami. It would be fitting revenge for all the menial errands he had run to cash in just once on a tip from Jake with Jake's own money.

Eddie was home alone when the phone call came, Nancy having gone to a show with a girlfriend.

When he picked up the phone, a feminine voice said in his ear, "Long distance for Mr. Edward Adamski, please."

"Speaking," Eddie said.

"Your party is on the line, sir. Go ahead."

Long Jake Attila's voice said, "Eddie?"

"Yeah, Jake. What's up?"

"I want to get a bet down for the seventh tomorrow night at the Batavia harness races, Eddie. You call Max Turpin for me, huh?"

"Sure, Jake. On who and how much?"

"White Lightning, fifty grand on the nose. Tell Max I want it spread thin."

Eddie felt his heartbeat increase. It had to be a fixed race. But he

wanted to make absolutely certain.

"Sounds like the fix is in," he said, managing to keep the eagerness out of his voice.

"It's in real good," Jake assured him. "Not a chance of a miss."

"How come you had to go all the way to Florida to get a tip on a New York track?" Eddie asked curiously.

"It was set up down here. Most of them are. This is where all the big gamblers hang out when they're not in Las Vegas. You got the bet now?"

"Sure, Jake. White Lightning in the seventh at Batavia tomorrow night, fifty grand on the nose. I'll phone Max right now, but how do I get the money to him?"

"You don't. Tell him to get it from Quig in the morning. I phoned Quig at the office earlier and told him I might be making a bet, so if Max came around to pick up fifty grand, it was okay."

"All right," Eddie said. "I'll take care of it. You having fun down there?"

"I always do," Jake told him.

When Jake hung up, Eddie phoned Max Turpin and caught him in. After explaining what Long Jake wanted, he said, "What time you plan to pick up the money from Quig?"

"Oh, ten, maybe," Turpin said. "That'll give me plenty of time to

spread the bets. The books will take them right up to eight p.m."

"Think I'll have you lay a bet for me too," Eddie said. "I'll drop by your place before you go to see Quig. Stick around until I get there."

"Sure," Turpin said. "I'll wait for you."

Eddie decided to risk only ten thousand of the money salted away in the safe deposit box. He wasn't enough of a gambler to risk everything, even on a supposedly sure bet. Just in case something went wrong, it wouldn't be a tragedy if he and Hazel had to squeeze by on forty thousand, but it would be if they were completely wiped out.

Eddie was at the bank when it opened. Fifteen minutes later he entered Turpin's Pool Parlor.

While the pool parlor brought its fat, balding proprietor a fairly good legitimate income, it was really only a front for Max Turpin's various semi-legal and totally illegal activities. The man was one of Long Jake's wholesalers, he was a fence for stolen goods and he acted as a go-between for big bettors who wanted to place a lot of money on a particular horse race without letting the bookies know that something was up. He had on call a small army of runners, most of whom, like Max, had a dozen other irons in the fire and therefore were

content with the small amount of work he threw them. Through his runners Max could spread the bet in small amounts over as many as a hundred different bookies. He took a ten percent cut of the winnings for his service, which included a guarantee that neither he nor any of his runners would either pass on the tip or bet the horse.

Eddie found the pool hall proprietor in his private office beyond the poolroom. He tossed a stack of a hundred hundred-dollar bills on the fat man's desk.

"Spread that on White Lightning's nose too," Eddie said. "And don't mention it to Quig when you pick up Jake's dough from him."

After riffling through the bills in a rapid count, Turpin shrugged. "Sure," he said, with no curiosity in his voice as to where Eddie had gotten the money.

The race results from Batavia didn't come over the radio until midnight. Nancy was in bed by then, but Eddie sat up to catch them. He was pleased to learn that White Lightning had won by three lengths.

He was rather disappointed at the price, however. The horse must have gone in as odds-on favorite, because he paid only \$2.80 to win. He got out a pencil and paper and figured out his profit at only \$3,600 after Max Turpin took out his

commission, plus the breakage.

He had been thinking in terms of a thirty or forty-thousand-dollar profit. Still, it was better than losing.

Friday morning after breakfast, Eddie salvaged his plane tickets from beneath his handkerchiefs and packed his largest suitcase. He couldn't think of any plausible excuse to give Nancy for taking more than one suitcase, and since he was never coming back, he wanted to take along as much of his clothing and personal possessions as he could carry.

Nancy was washing the breakfast dishes in the kitchen when he carried the suitcase into the front room. She came to the door and regarded it with surprise.

"Aren't you coming home for dinner before you take off for Albany?" she asked.

"I want to get on the road early," he said. "I'll catch a sandwich en route."

He went over to give her a good-bye kiss.

"Drive careful, honey," she told him.

"Sure," he said. "See you Monday."

He phoned Max Turpin from the nearest drugstore.

"You hit," the pool hall proprietor told him. "You've got thirteen thousand, six hundred coming."

"When do I collect?" Eddie asked.

"Oh, any time after eight p.m."

"So late?" Eddie protested. He had planned to be on the road with Hazel long before then.

"My runners have to collect from half the bookies in greater New York," Turpin said. "It takes time."

"All right," Eddie conceded. "I'll see you at eight sharp."

He drove to the office, picked up a supply of new numbers tickets and started making his rounds. By humping, he made it halfway through his schedule by noon. After a half-hour break for lunch he drove to the bank and cleared out his safe deposit box. He put the money in a briefcase he had brought along and locked it in the trunk of his car.

Then he resumed his rounds and finished by three-thirty. He drove over to Hazel's, where they skimmed off a final thousand dollars from his last day's collection.

Hazel had quit her job at Mad-den's Supper Club several days before, had closed out her bank account and was all set to take off except for a little final packing. Their original plan had been to leave town as soon as Eddie made his final check-in, and catch dinner somewhere on the road. When Eddie broke the news that they wouldn't be able to leave until after

eight p.m., she was more pleased to learn they would be richer by another \$3,600 than she was upset by the delay.

"We can have dinner somewhere in town and collect the money just before we leave," she said. "I can wait in the car."

"I'd better pick you up here afterward," he told her. "Too many people around that neighborhood know me. Why make it any easier for Jake to get on our trail by letting somebody get a glimpse of the woman I took off with?"

"All right," she agreed rather reluctantly.

"We'll have plenty of time for dinner first, if we go to some restaurant near here," he said. "I'll be back after I check in my collections."

"All right," she said again.

The check-in went as smoothly as usual. Eddie drove back to collect Hazel and they had dinner in a nearby restaurant. He dropped her back at her apartment at twenty minutes to eight and told her to be ready to be picked up about twenty after.

"Here," he said in afterthought, handing her the plane tickets. "You better hang onto these, so we're sure they don't get lost."

She took the tickets, gave him a quick kiss and slid from the car.

At exactly eight Eddie parked in

front of Turpin's Pool Parlor. There was no one in the poolroom but two oversized men playing pool. At first Eddie was surprised, because usually the place was crowded. Then he recognized the men as Bat Manelli and Tony Spatz, two of Long Jake Attila's goons, and guessed that the other clientele had departed by request so there would be no witnesses. Eddie turned to leave too, but he was too late.

"Huh-uh," a raspy voice said behind him.

Eddie paused and glanced over his shoulder. Bat Manelli wasn't even looking his way—he was drawing back his cue for a final shot—but Tony Spatz was pointing a large automatic at Eddie.

Discouragedly Eddie reversed course and walked over to the men. Spatz gestured toward the office door with his gun. Eddie went over and opened the door, with Spatz trailing him. Bat Manelli laid down his cue and followed.

Max Turpin was not in his office. Instead, Long Jake Attila sat behind his desk. Nancy was seated in a chair alongside the desk. The two gunmen closed the door behind them and leaned against it.

Eddie looked from Jake to Nancy and got a sweet smile from his wife. He looked back at his brother-in-law and met total lack of expres-

sion. He said rather inanely, "I thought you were in Florida."

"I never went," Jake said coldly. "When I phoned Nancy to tell her goodbye, she'd just found your plane tickets from Cleveland to Rio."

Eddie looked at his wife and got an even sweeter smile. "I was feeling guilty about neglecting you so much," she said. "So I decided to put your fresh laundry away."

Even in his numbed state of shock Eddie couldn't help admiring her acting ability. When he thought he was making up a plausible excuse to leave town over the weekend, he had merely been letting her know just when he planned to take off for good.

He looked back at Jake, who said, "Those tickets smelled like a knockdown to me, particularly since receipts had been off over five percent for nearly three months. I canceled my Florida trip and had Quig do some fast checking with wholesalers."

Eddie licked his lips. "You—you called me from Florida."

Attila slowly shook his head. "From my office. That long-distance operator was my secretary."

While Eddie was absorbing this, Attila went on, "I could have pulled you in and had you worked over to tell me where the money

was, but it seemed simpler to make you bring it to me voluntarily. That's why the fake fixed race. I figured you couldn't resist that. You crossed me up by only risking part of it, though; not that it really mattered. You had to come pick up your winnings, and I rigged it so the payoff would be after the time I figured you planned to blow town. That way you'd probably have everything in your car you planned to take to Rio, including the rest of the money."

Eddie said huskily, "What if White Lightning hadn't won?"

Jake shrugged. "He was all of the experts' best-pick-of-the-day. But if he hadn't, Max would have phoned you that he hadn't been able to get your bet down, so you could come pick up your ten grand." He glanced over at the two gunmen leaning against the door. "Shake him down."

They did a thorough job, piling the contents of Eddie's pockets on the desk before Long Jake. The latter examined the bill clip, which contained only about a hundred dollars, tossed it aside and picked up the car keys.

Letting them dangle, he asked, "Anybody waiting outside in your car?"

Eddie shook his head.

"There were two plane tickets," Nancy said, no longer smiling.

"The second one must have been for a woman."

"There's nobody out in the car," Eddie said.

His wife glanced at her brother. "Maybe he planned to meet her in Cleveland. Too bad. I would have liked a look at her."

"It's less complicated this way," Jake said. "If he'd brought her along, I would have had to have her shut up." He tossed the keys to Bat Manelli. "Bring everything he's got in the car in here."

The oversized gunman nodded and went out.

Nancy got to her feet. "I don't think I'll stay for the finale," she said. She went over to the door, turned and gave Eddie a final smile. "Goodbye, dear."

"Wait, honey," he said with a

touch of panic. "You know what Jake'll do to me unless you ask him not to. I know I was doing you a dirty trick, but I swear I'll make it up to you if you talk him into going easy."

Her smile widened. "You don't understand, dear. The guilt feeling that made me put away your laundry didn't come just from my having neglected you, but because I've had a lover in Buffalo for some time. It's going to be quite convenient for me to be a widow."

She swept out of the room just as Bat Manelli carried the suitcase and the briefcase in.

Eddie had the despairing thought that at least Hazel would have some small consolation for all their trouble; she had two airplane tickets she could convert to cash.



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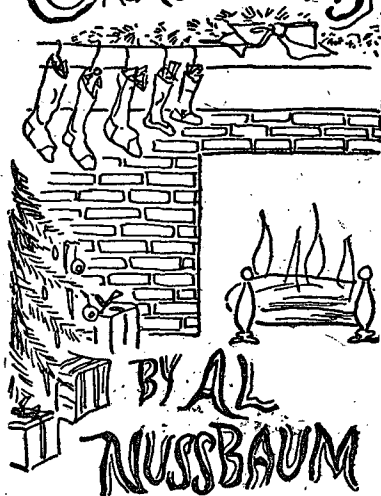
Pat Hitchcock

Good counsel may sometimes be heeded, but is rarely so greatly exceeded.

The PROBLEM of CHRISTMAS

GEORGE DELL removed a plastic-covered weather map from his briefcase and, placing the case across his knees as a desk, added the information he'd just received from the airport weather station. He paid no attention to the bustle around him in the waiting room, nor to the blaring loudspeaker which announced arriving and departing flights. The weather map claimed his full attention. He carefully wiped away old markings with a small piece of cloth and filled in new data with a black grease pencil. Then he pursed his lips thoughtfully and studied the result of his efforts.

From here in Kansas City he had a wide choice of nonstop flights to other cities. For instance, he could go to Dallas, San Francisco, Chicago, or New York; but Chicago, which was threatened with a record snow storm, was the place he



wanted to go. He rechecked the map and made some hasty computations on the border of it. Then, satisfied he'd made no error, he hurried to the ticket counter and bought a seat on the next plane to Chicago. With any luck he'd be there before the storm.

George Dell was a traveling sales-

man—an excellent one. He traveled the entire United States for a manufacturer of diesel generators and emergency power equipment. He held a college degree, and he could talk horsepower and kilowatts to technicians and finances to controllers. He was also a very proficient amateur meteorologist. When a man travels thousands of miles each month, the weather plays an important part in his life. Realizing this, George had made it his business to know as much about the weather as he did about the products he sold.

He was able to draw up forecasts that were often more accurate than any available to him, and which were more suited to his needs. The result was that he had plenty of time to juggle and rearrange business appointments when adverse weather threatened a commitment, and equally important to a family man like George, he was usually able to be home for holidays by being prepared for poor weather. Birthdays, anniversaries, and most other special occasions seldom presented a problem to George, but Christmas always did. That's why he wanted to reach Chicago before the airport became snowed in. If he could get to Chicago ahead of the bad weather, the problem of Christmas would be solved for another year.

When his flight was called, George joined a number of young servicemen homeward bound for Christmas. They milled around in small boisterous groups, waiting to present their tickets and board the plane. The way they called out to passing stewardesses and followed every attractive female with their eyes reminded him of how he had been when he was in the Navy. Now, stout and fortyish with thinning hair and the slightly harried appearance of the long-married, he doubted that anyone would guess he'd once been quite a ladies' man.

During his first years on the road, he had been the perfect prototype of the fictional traveling salesman. He was loud and brash with a seemingly endless stream of stories. He courted women in a dozen cities simultaneously; and was always ready to date an attractive secretary or receptionist. His fondness for women increased until the physical strain and economic drain became too much for him.

Even for a man who could work where and when he chose, the financial demands of such a life made it impractical. It was while he was trying to increase his income that he received the advice that changed everything for him. "Be sincere," the top salesman of another company had told him. "Sure, customers laugh at your jokes and think

you're a helluva guy, but they don't buy your product. No one can bring himself to trust completely a man who's too glib."

It was as simple as that: be sincere. He tried it and it worked. His sales increased two-hundred percent the first month.

But sincerity wasn't something he was able to turn on and off like the generators he sold. For him to be sincere in one thing meant he had to be sincere in all things. He was married within a month.

Marriage made a big difference to him. It toned him down and quenched the fires. It sated his appetites. It made him realize that the life he had been leading was ridiculous at best.

During the flight, George had a seat by the window where he could look out at the cloud formations, always good indicators of weather. Conditions became progressively worse until just outside of Chicago the air became turbulent and the sky full of snow. The storm had reached Chicago before him, but by only a few unimportant minutes. The runways were still clear, and

the plane's landing was smooth.

Inside the terminal building, George Dell got change from a girl at the magazine stand. As he had anticipated, the storm was already causing flights to be canceled. He was certain news of the blizzard would be on TV across the country.

He found a pay phone, dropped a coin in the slot, and dialed a local number near the Loop. "I just got in," he said. "I'm at the airport."

"That's wonderful!" his wife answered. "I was afraid you might not be able to get home for Christmas when I saw the snow. I began to picture you in Denver or Boston or wherever you were stranded last year."

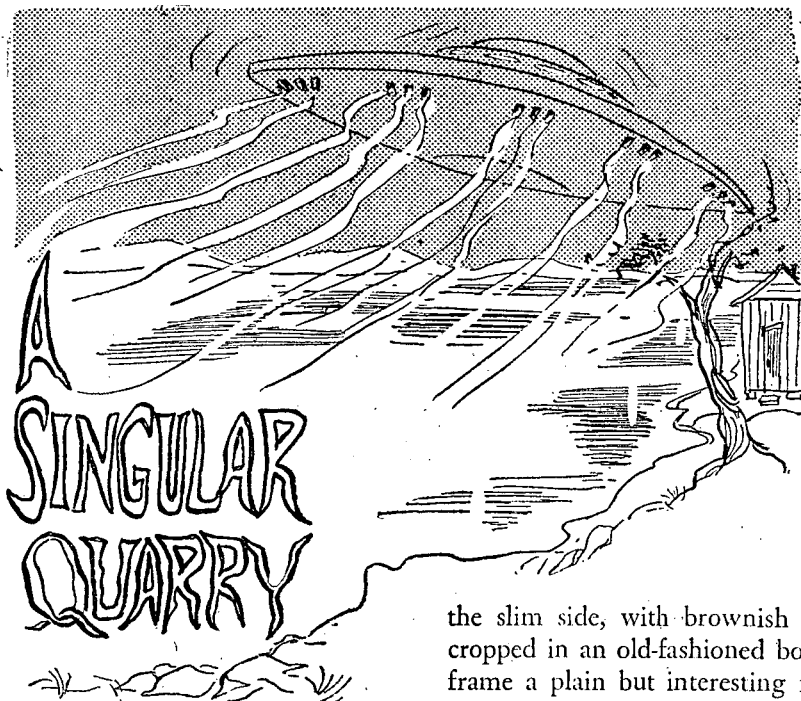
"San Francisco. It was San Francisco," he offered.

"Well, I'm glad you could be here this year."

"A man likes to spend Christmas with his family," he said with his habitual sincerity. He stacked coins on the shelf in the phone booth as he spoke, and hoped he had enough change to cover calls to his families in San Francisco, Dallas, and New York.



There is no one to refute that the most astounding cases are found only in the evanescent memories of the transitory survivors.



A SINGULAR QUARRY

AFTER a timid knock, the woman half-opened my office door and asked, "Mr. William Ash, the private detective?"

About forty, she was tall and on

the slim side, with brownish hair cropped in an old-fashioned bob to frame a plain but interesting face, minus makeup. Her modest short dress and fancy sandals, all a golden tan, were hard to judge as to their cost, but the wedding ring, a jade ring and pin could all have been trading stamp stuff. No money

A NOVELETTE

by **Ed Lacy**

here, I decided with resignation.

I stood up. "That's my name. Come in." Up close, the hazel eyes were nervous, with tense lines around the thin, red mouth. Maybe she was fifty. I pegged it for a husband-shadowing job.

She sat on the one chair alongside my desk, crossing very nice legs. She could be thirty-five. "I'm Mrs. Daisy Davis." Opening her clutch bag, she dropped a \$1000 bill on my battered desk.

"Mrs. Davis, you have an enchanting way of opening a conversation," I said, staring at the big bill, "but you seem to have misread my door. It reads *private investigator*, not *thug*. I don't go in for strong-arm stuff, even for a grand."

"I want a detective, not a goon," she said calmly. "When I tell people about it, they react as if I belong in a ha-ha institution. So whenever you think I'm talking wildly, Mr. Ash, look at the money. It will bring you back to reality."

"Okay, I can hardly take my greedy eyes off it. What people have you been talking to, Mrs. Davis? Talking about what?"

"I've been talking to the police, but when they started staring at me with that she's-a-nut look, I couldn't tell them about it. Mr. Ash, I'm hardly a crime buff, but I've traveled over three hundred miles to

see you because I remembered reading about a case you worked on several years ago, where a gambler was arrested for murder and even after he was convicted, even though you were off salary, you kept working on the case and found the real killer. I like that sort of work attitude."

I shrugged, keeping an eye on the grand green sight. "Once you get started, you want to see the finish. What's your trouble, Mrs. Davis?"

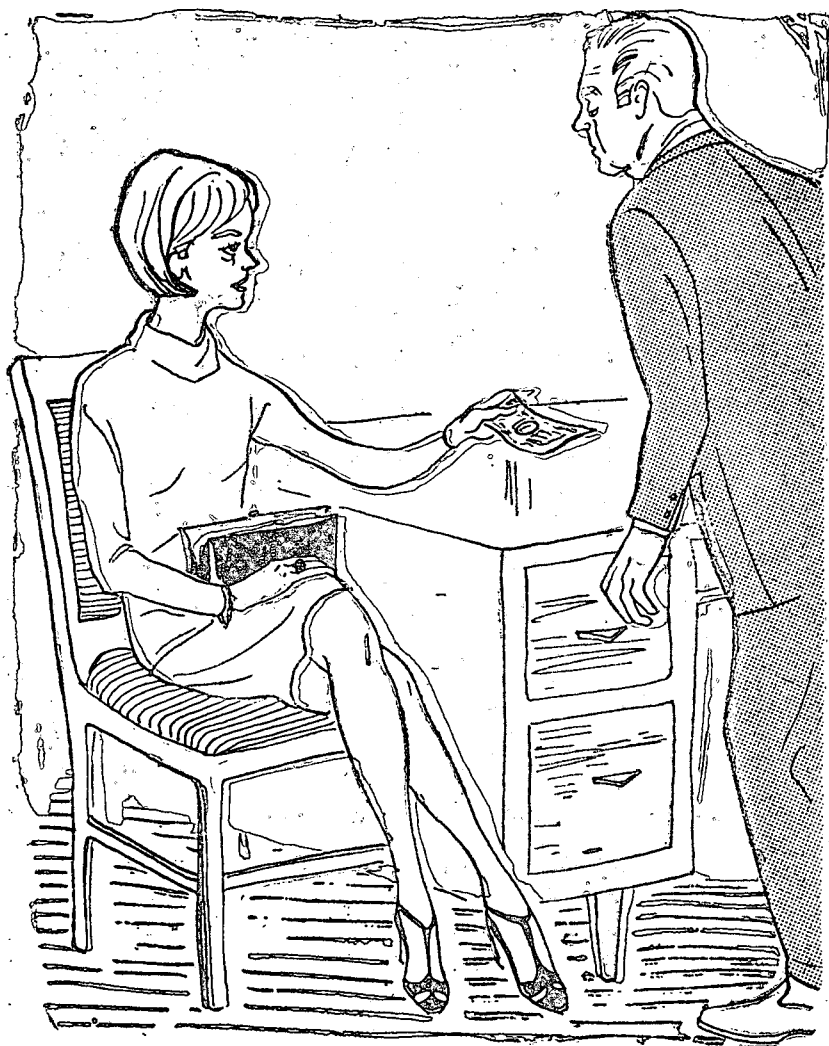
"Nick, my husband, was killed a month ago. He died a horrible death; he was tortured. I want you to find the killer or killers. My husband was murdered either by a man named Carlos, who represents a South African diamond syndicate, or by somebody—keep your eyes on the money—from outer space."

I tried not to blink. The last thing she looked like was a loon. "Outer space? Don't tell me flying saucers are involved?"

"They definitely are," she said.

I managed to take my eyes from the money to stare at her. She stared back, soft eyes very steady. I said, "Take it from the top, Mrs. Davis."

"Nick and I had been married for twenty years, but never had children. I worked as a telephone operator, while Nick was a morgue keeper at a U.S. airbase. I think we were a very average couple. Our



joint income was about \$9,000. We had a comfortable little house, an old car, and about a thousand dollars in the bank. Today I have a Caddy and over \$46,000 in cash. All

this happened over the last four months. In short, Nick came into a bundle."

My palms were sweating slightly; I rubbed them on my pants. "Why

does a stateside airbase need a morgue keeper?"

"If a pilot is killed in a crash, the body is kept in the morgue pending an investigation. Actually, it was a minor civil service job; Nick was a sort of glorified porter. Now, Mr. Ash, I've never seen a UFO, but in our area several sightings have been reported in the last year. People claim they have seen lights—flying saucers—hovering over the power lines. Whether it's true or merely their imagination, I frankly don't know. I do know the airbase sends out fighter planes trying to find these saucers after each sighting.

"Well, about seven months ago Nick came home quite excited one night, told me it was top secret and all that, but four small bodies, about the size of boys, had been brought to the morgue, each sewed up in a canvas bag. Nick told me rumors had it that the bodies were humanoids, a form of human life, from a saucer. Nick never opened the canvas bags, of course, but merely kept them in the refrigerated vaults.

"About a month later a UFO was reported over an abandoned quarry one night and again the following night. On both nights Nick was out of the house, and he was fired the day after the second UFO sighting. He never told me why. The

official reason was 'inefficiency'. Nick was only six years away from his pension but he didn't seem upset at losing his job. He showed me a heavy hunk of what looked like cloudy glass, which must have weighed ten pounds. He warned me not to talk about it, said it was a huge, rough diamond. I never saw the stone again, and Nick flatly refused to tell me what had happened at the airbase. My theory, and it's only a *theory*, is that Nick was given the diamond by somebody from a UFO in return for smuggling out one or all of the bodies in the morgue. The Air Force won't discuss the case."

"Hold it. This ten-pound stone, was it really a diamond?"

"I assume so. Nick was very mysterious about it, claimed I would be safer not knowing too much. All I know is that Nick went to see a jeweler in Springfield, which is the nearest city to Eastville, where we live. The jeweler, a Mr. Frank Simpson, has now vanished, but prior to his disappearance he told me Nick had brought him several rough diamonds to sell, weighing a total of 109 carats. A week later Nick suddenly had thousands of dollars, told me to quit my job. A week or so after that, Nick had more money, and bought the Caddy. Now, this is only my *theory*, but

Nick would go out to the quarry and then ride to Springfield the next day. Later, he would go to Springfield again and return with thousands of dollars. I'm sure he was cutting up the big diamond and selling bits of it to Mr. Simpson, who cut and polished them and, in turn, sold them to diamond merchants in New York."

"Did Nick know anything about diamonds?"

"No."

"Cutting a diamond calls for great skill."

She nodded. "I think Nick was merely chipping off bits of the stone somehow, and taking the chips to Mr. Simpson. Nick was very happy, told me he would soon be a millionaire and then we'd take a trip around the world. Mr. Simpson told me—"

"When did he tell you all this?"

"The day after Nick's body was found. I went to see Simpson and he was packing, ready to take off, badly frightened. He told me the diamonds were flawless, the finest stones he'd ever seen, and that a Mr. Carlos of a large South African diamond syndicate had questioned him as to where the diamonds had been found. He wanted Simpson to agree to sell only to the syndicate. I know that on the day before—before Nick was found murdered, he received two phone calls from

this Mr. Carlos, I overheard Nick shouting that he wasn't interested in any deal, and flatly refused to say where the rough gems came from. I don't know what was said on the phone, but Nick was very angry and the second time, before he hung up, he said, 'You can't threaten me!' When I asked, Nick told me not to worry. He went to the quarry that night and never returned. The next morning they found Nick's corpse. He had been burned across various parts of his body, died from shock and a heart attack."

Keeping my eyes glued on the thousand buck bill and my sanity, I asked, "What did the police do about all this?"

"Nothing. They claim Nick was killed by a person or persons unknown. You see, the second I started telling them about the flying saucer, well, they reacted like I was crazy. When I mentioned the diamond syndicate, they were sure I'd flipped; diamonds have never been found around this part of the country. I assume that when the police checked with the airbase they ran into 'No comment.' I want Nick's killer or killers found, if possible."

My eyes traced the 1000 on each corner of the bill as I asked, "Mrs. Davis, where were you on the night Nick was killed?"

Her gasp made me look at her.

Face flushed, she asked, "Are you hinting I had—"

"All I'm trying to do is get a few facts. You said Nick didn't return all that night. Weren't you worried?"

"I was playing whist at a neighbor's. The police checked on that. I came home at about eleven p.m. and went to sleep. I'm a sound sleeper; it was only in the morning I realized Nick hadn't come home. If I had killed my husband, would I hire you to find the killers?"

"Could be you're hiring me to find the rest of that big diamond?"

Daisy shook her head. "I don't care about that unlucky stone! Of course if you should find it, all right, but I told you I have enough money, plus there's about \$15,000 due on Nick's insurance and pension fund money. I want my husband's killers found. Frankly, there is one other reason: I'm frightened. I have this feeling of being watched all the time."

"This Carlos character been calling you since Nick died?"

"No. I never see anybody, but I feel I'm being followed, watched."

"Have you been out to the quarry since? What's out there?"

"The only time I was there was when the police sent for me to identify Nick's b-body. It's a big rocky hole, full of water. I think, at one time, they used to get slate, or

something, from the quarry. It hasn't been used for, oh, over twenty years. There's an abandoned shack and parts of rusty machinery around. Kids used to swim there, but there was a drowning a few years back and nobody goes to the quarry now. Mr. Ash, will you take the case?"

As it happened, the only thing I was working on was locating witnesses to a car accident and that had reached the waiting stage, for answers to some letters I'd mailed the day before. "Sure, I'll take the case. I charge a hundred a day plus expenses, and I don't guarantee results. That understood, Mrs. Davis?"

She didn't flinch at the fee, merely said, "All I ask is that you do your best."

I took out a pad and wrote down the exact dates of the UFO sightings, when Nick was bounced, Simpson's address, some data on herself and Nick, which wasn't much as they were both orphans. About Carlos, I asked, "Do you know his full name? The diamond syndicate he worked for?"

"All I know is, his name was Carlos. Whether that's his first or last name, I can't say, nor did Nick ever mention the name of the syndicate he worked for."

"How do you know it's a South African one?"

"Mr. Simpson didn't mention the name, but he did say it was South African."

I typed up a statement, which she signed, stating Mrs. Davis was retaining me. When she said, "Keep the \$1000 as a retainer," I told her to put it back in her bag. Then I walked her to my bank, where I had her change it: you have to sign a form when changing a \$1000 bill. Daisy Davis really impressed me; while in the bank she also cashed a \$500 bill. She was returning to Eastville, but I suggested she stay in the city for a few days as a safety measure. She registered at a good hotel. Leo Klein, the house dick, had once been my patrol car partner, and I told him to keep an eye on her.

Back in my office, I sat at my desk, carefully counting and re-counting the twenty \$50 bills, sort of mentally pinching myself. In twenty years as a city cop and dick and eight years as a private badge, I thought I'd worked on every kind of a case, but this was my first flying saucer caper.

In investigative work there are things you can do without leaving your desk. I checked Mrs. Daisy Davis with a guy working for a credit bureau who gave me off-the-cuff info in return for a few bottles around Christmas. Then I phoned a reporter whom I had supported

for a number of years when he was my son-in-law, and we are still friendly. I asked him to see if the papers had anything on the UFO sightings in Eastville on the dates Daisy had given me. My ex-son-in-law said, "Flying saucers? Bill, have you flipped?"

"I'm not sure myself. But let me know what you find, Sonny."

Then I called a guy I knew on the force who is now a captain and part of our local police brass. After the usual where-have-you-been small talk, he gave me the name of a sergeant on the Eastville police force (10 men, all told) but when I asked who he knew on the New York City force, or if he was friendly with anybody on the New York Jewelers Association security force, he said that would take a little thinking, he'd call me back.

When I long-distanced Eastville, a sergeant said, "So she's hiring private tin? Well, there isn't much I can tell you about the Nick Davis killing. He had no police record, didn't run around, and Mrs. Davis' alibi checked out; she was playing cards that night. So, no motive for the killing. We figure it was the work of a nut. There were lines burnt into his soles and legs, like a tic-tac-toe design. Nick Davis had \$167 in his wallet; it wasn't touched. The work of a nut, for sure."

"This tic-tac-toe design, could it

mean anything, do you think?"

"Sure, it means a nut with some kind of small branding iron came upon Nick, that's all. Of course, the case is in our open files, but we haven't any working leads."

I tried not to laugh. The case was in their "open" files—I'd give odds this was the only murder case Eastville had in the last fifty years. "Didn't Mrs. Davis have some leads?"

"Look, I've known Daisy Davis for a lot of years, mister, and generally she's a level-headed woman. But the grief, the shock of losing Nick, sent Daisy out of her mind. Really off. She talked about men from some other planet, South African gunmen, diamonds. Daisy was in a bad way."

"Tell me, have there been any UFO sightings around Eastville?"

"Man, don't you start *that*. We get calls almost every month, some folks so positive they seen one, they're ready to fight if you don't believe them. Ask me, all crackpot stuff. We refer such calls to the airbase, where they forget them. A person sees a star twinkle, or a plane light, and right away they're shouting they seen a UFO."

I thanked him and after I hung up, my bottle pal in the credit outfit called to tell me Mrs. Daisy Davis had a solid rating. He ended with, "Bill, if she's your client,

you've really hooked a live one."

My police captain called to give me the name of the head of security for the Manhattan Jewelers Association, and added, "Bill, I only met this guy once. He used to be an FBI man. If you want info from him, you'd best go see him in New York. Phoning him will only be a waste of money. What are you working on, Bill? We haven't had any stolen jewelry case here in months."

"This is an out-of-town thing. Thanks for the dope. I'll drop in and see how much beer you can drink one of these days."

Minutes later my ex-son-in-law phoned. "Adjust your space helmet, Pops. There were alleged UFO sightings on the dates you mentioned. Several people claim to have seen them, sober folks, too. The fact is, unidentified flying objects have been seen fairly often around Eastville, but the airbase there keeps hush-hush on the whole deal, Okay?"

"Thanks."

"What do you hear from Ruthie, Bill?"

"She and her husband are making out fine in Los Angeles. They have a baby girl."

"Good. Ruthie always wanted kids. Bill, how about you and Alice coming over some night, meet my new wife?"

"Sure. We'll make a date, one of these days."

I long-distanced the U.S. airbase at Eastville and finally got the information officer on the other end of the wire. When I asked, "Is it true you have, or had, bodies taken from a UFO in your morgue?" I could hear him suck in his breath, then sputter, "Who the hell are you?"

"Merely a curious taxpayer. Is it true?"

"No comment."

"Why? Why should it be hush-hush? Or are we at war with Mars?"

"It is an Air Force policy that all UFO information must come from Washington."

"Then I take it you have, or had, the bodies at the Eastville Air Base?"

"I never confirmed that, or denied it. Perhaps you didn't hear me. I said I have no comment."

"Oh I heard you. In fact, this is all on tape," I said to make him nervous. As I hung up I felt a little better; if Daisy was a nut, she wasn't alone in this.

I phoned Mrs. Davis at her hotel and was told she was out. I left a message that I'd call her late tomorrow, then got Leo on the phone.

He said, "How would I know where she went? Maybe shopping, to a movie. Bill, she didn't check

out of the hotel, I'm positive."

"Keep an eye on Mrs. Davis. I'll take care of you."

"I bet. Listen, the doc took me off booze and cigarettes."

"Great, Leo, I'll send you a fat box of candy."

At 3:30 p.m. I quit being a telephone jockey with a call to my wife. "Alice, I have to go to New York tonight on a case. How about coming along?"

"Tonight? For how long, Bill?"

"We should be back tomorrow night."

"Too much traveling and packing for so short a time," Alice said, as I knew she would, but she liked to be asked. "Want me to meet you at the airport with a light bag?"

"A great idea, honey. Just a shirt, tie and toilet articles."

Locking the office, I crossed the street to make a reservation on a 10:20 p.m. jet. The wife and I had a good supper at the airport and by midnight I was pounding my ear in a Manhattan hotel.

The Manhattan Jewelers Association's security force had a swank suite of offices and at 11 a.m. I was talking to the head security officer, also on the swank side, a well set-up guy looking like the movie version of an executive, with brushed gray hair, good clothes, even a manicure.

He was good, too. I merely told

him I was on a murder case which might be connected with diamonds and he let it go at that. When I asked if his association knew of a Frank Simpson of Springfield, he called the name into the intercom on his desk and a few minutes later a pretty secretary brought in a file.

He said, "Mr. Ash, it's odd you should mention Mr. Simpson. There's much interest in him in the market lately. Mr. Simpson started out in the Diamond Exchange as a cutter and polisher, then became a dealer. When his wife died eight years ago, he gave up the hustle here, and opened a general jewelry shop in Springfield."

"Why the special interest in Simpson now? And what did you mean by hustle? Was he legit?"

"Oh yes, he was legit. You see, Mr. Ash, in the diamond trade a fellow can have two feet of window space and part of a counter, yet he can be doing a yearly gross business in the hundreds of thousands, carry a half-million dollar stock, often on him. I used the word 'hustle' because diamonds are one of the most competitive businesses you'll find and a successful dealer really has to go out and hustle. As for the sudden interest in Simpson, he has sold a number of stones recently, which he cut and polished himself, all absolutely flawless, the finest diamonds ever seen. Mr.

Simpson refused to reveal the source of the rough stones, but these gems brought top price because of their remarkable purity—no flaws or foreign matter. They are very rare, and have a faint black tinge."

"Could they be man-made gems? I think I once read that diamonds can be made in a lab."

He smiled. "Indeed they can, Mr. Ash. But to make a, say, three-carat diamond would cost three times what a natural gem would sell for. Mr. Simpson has been rather mysterious as to his source and there are rumors that he's in contact with a new mine."

"Have diamonds been found in the States?"

"Oh yes. Single, alluvial diamonds have been found, of poor quality, and there was a mine in Murfreesboro, Arkansas."

"Is a diamond mine a big affair, like a coal mine? Could it be a one or two man operation, for example?"

He shook his carefully brushed gray head. "Diamonds can be found on the surface, even in river beds, as gold nuggets are sometimes found. But the great diamond mines are as deep and large as any coal mine. A true diamond mine would hardly be a one man operation."

"About South Africa—Suppose

Simpson had somehow found a diamond mine here in the States, would the diamond syndicate contact him?"

"Certainly, if he began selling gems in any quantity. The price of diamonds is kept high by carefully limiting the supply."

I asked, "If Simpson refused to sell to them, would they resort to strong-arm stuff?"

He shook his handsome head again. "Mr. Ash, the diamond syndicates are big business, with millions in reserve. If they felt it necessary to get control of a new mine, they would make so large an offer no man in his right mind would refuse. Naturally, there can be other reasons for not selling. The Russians are mining diamonds and there's a possibility they may someday flood the market, a political move to deal an economic kayo to the Union of South Africa. But as for a single mine owner, the syndicate could top any offer the mine owner made. It's strictly business, not a muscle deal, at least here in the States. Certainly the history of diamonds is one of violence. If a native African should stumble upon a mine and refuse to deal with the syndicate, violence might be used. But, as I said, not here in the States, if that is what you're driving at."

"Okay. Now, do these syndicates

have some representatives here?"

"Yes. There are three major syndicates but on a price and supply level, they operate as a single organization in the States."

"Do they have a representative here called Carlos? I don't know if that's his first or last name."

"I never heard the name and I personally know all their agents. Mr. Ash, let me paint a clear picture for you. If Mr. Simpson really has found a mine with these superior diamonds, what would he gain by not working with the syndicate? If he flooded the market, the price of the gems would drop. Operating a mine calls for a large overhead. It would be much easier for him to accept an offer of, say, two or three million for his mine, skip the headaches."

He had Simpson's picture in his file, a fat-faced guy, middle-aged. Handsome had a copy of the snap made for me and by two a.m. I was flying home, smugly pleased at the way the case was breaking.

After phoning Alice from the airport, I went directly to Daisy Davis' hotel. Leo met me in the lobby. "Bill, I've been calling you. Your bird checked out an hour ago."

"Damn."

"No way I could stop her. But our switchboard operator says Mrs. Davis phoned the bus terminal a half hour before she checked out."

I took a cab to the terminal, was told the only bus to Springfield, which was the closest stop to Eastville, had pulled out before Daisy left, so she'd had to drive. I got my car from the garage, stopped at the office to pick up my gun, phoned Alice, then started for Eastville, clocking ninety once I hit the throughway.

Eastville has a two-block-long main drag, a supermarket the largest store. The Davis house was a modest deal which had recently been reshingled, new storm windows added. When Daisy opened the door I asked, "Why didn't you stay at the hotel?"

"I didn't have a change of clothing and I thought it silly to buy some when I could come here, pack a bag, and return to the hotel by evening."

"You might have ended up as the best dressed woman in the cemetery. If you were returning, why did you check out of the hotel?"

"Force of habit, saving a day's room rent. Did you learn anything, Mr. Ash?"

If she had returned to the hotel by night she wouldn't have saved a penny. I said, "We're dealing with a killer, possibly a nut, so . . ."

"A spaceman?"

"Come on, forget that flying saucer stuff, our killer is an Earth man. I'm spending the night here."

"Oh. Really, what will the neighbors think?"

"Daisy, what will the neighbors think if you're found murdered? Skip the gossip, say I'm your older brother, or some such nonsense. I'm hungry and have some questions to ask. Let's go out for supper."

"That would really start gossip. We can eat here."

Daisy wasn't a bad cook, and as we ate I asked, "How long has it been since Simpson closed his store and took off?"

"The day after Nick was killed, about a month ago."

"Did you tell the police about Simpson?"

"No. Soon as I mentioned diamonds, they reacted as if I were crazy. What has Mr. Simpson to do with this?"

"I'll tell you tomorrow. Have you heard from Simpson since then?"

"No."

"Have you any idea where he is?"

"None."

"Did this Carlos guy ever call you?"

"I never spoke to him."

"This morgue job Nick had, did he work alone?"

"Yes. As I explained, it was part of his porter work at the airbase."

"Except for yourself and Simpson, did Nick ever tell anybody else about the diamond?"

"I'm sure he didn't. Can't you tell

me what you've found out, Bill?"

"In the morning we'll drive into Springfield. I've a few things to check out, then I'll tell you who the killer is. Let me help you with the dishes."

We sat around and watched TV over a few beers, like an old married couple, but unlike an old couple I slept on the livingroom couch. We went to sleep at ten-thirty and at eleven the phone rang. I answered it on the first ring since the phone was on a table next to the couch. I said, "Hello?" and didn't get any answer, although I could hear somebody breathing at the other end of the wire. When I hung up I turned to see Daisy standing in the doorway of the bedroom, the light behind her silhouetting her good figure.

"Who was that, Bill?"

"I don't know. Were you expecting a call? I mean, if a man answers . . ."

She shook her head.

"Ever get any calls before, where nobody answered?"

She shook her head again, said, "Good night, Bill," and shut her door, turning off the light. I moved the chair with my clothes and shoulder holster nearer the couch and stretched out again, thinking hard about Daisy. I was thinking she'd told me she was such a heavy sleeper that she hadn't been aware,

until morning, that her husband hadn't returned, the night he was killed. Now, one phone ring had got her up. The case had seemed so simple—but if Daisy was in this with Simpson, why had she hired me?

I fell off into an uneasy sleep and in the morning, after a decent breakfast, we drove to Springfield, which was only twenty miles away. This is a fairly large city with a big shopping complex and several streets of shops. The Simpson jewelry store was a small affair, with a locked steel gate across the one window and the entrance. I noticed a trade magazine and a single letter inside the gate. I waited for the mailman and when he tossed two more letters through the gate, I asked, "Have you any idea when Mr. Simpson will be back? He was repairing my watch."

"There was a sign pasted on the window, saying he was ill, but would reopen shortly. Wind and rain took the sign off last week."

"Did he leave any forwarding address?"

"Nope. Why do you ask?"

"He's been gone a month and there isn't much mail piled up inside the gate."

The mailman stared at the few pieces of mail. "Say, that's a fact. There was a whole pile of mail there the other day. Guess he must

have come by and picked it up."

"You know his home address?"

"Sure, here. He lives over the store."

Returning to the car, I glanced at the apartment above the shop, the two windows shut, shades pulled down. I drove around the block. The rear windows sported an air conditioner. By going through an alley and over a fence, I could get to Simpson's apartment, but it wasn't worth the risk. Instead, I stopped at a stationery store, bought paper and an envelope. I wrote:

Simpson: I've found the mine. Important I see you at once, re: polishing and cutting some stones.

Carlos

I put this in the envelope and tossed it inside the store gate. Then we drove to the Davis house, by way of the quarry, which was a desolate looking spot even in the sunshine. Over lunch Daisy asked, "Obviously you suspect Frank Simpson. What about Carlos?"

"Carlos doesn't exist, like the flying saucers. I don't know where Nick got the diamond, but I think Simpson was sure your husband had stumbled upon a diamond mine and tortured him in an effort to get the location of the mine. I expect to have a showdown with Simpson tonight."

"You know where he is, then?"

"No, but he'll find me."

I sat by the picture window, watching the street. The phone call came at the end of the afternoon. When Daisy said, "Mr. Simpson, where—" I grabbed the phone from her hand, said, "Simpson, this is Carlos. Be at your store in the morning. I'll have some rough stones ready for cutting. My syndicate has worked out a deal with Mrs. Davis." I hung up quickly and returned to the window.

Daisy asked, "What was that about?"

"You ever go bluefishing?"

She shook her head.

"A blue is a vicious and greedy fish. So you toss out a lot of bait, including one with a hook in it, and hope the blue will be so busy eating he'll take the hook. That's called chumming."

"I still don't understand, Bill."

I smiled at her. "Why should I tell you the secrets of the private eye racket? You're too pretty to be a good investigator."

"All right, I'll shut up, and you stop putting me on," Daisy said, so pleased that she blushed. I turned to stare at the street again, waiting to see if Simpson would try watching the house. All I saw were neighbors returning from work. I really hoped Simpson showed tonight; it would be a problem

spending another night in the Davis house—on the couch. That kind of problem I had avoided, until now.

We had a light snack for supper and at seven p.m. I went to the bathroom, checked my gun, then told Daisy to visit her next-door neighbors, to stay there until I returned, and I turned on the house lights. She gave me a key and I got in my car, drove around the block, returned to watch Daisy go to the next house. When I was convinced she was staying there, I drove to the quarry. The moon was out and the place was spooky as hell. A rough hill of stone rose about a hundred jagged feet above a dark pond some thirty feet across. There was a shack ready to fall apart, the remains of some kind of winch, rusted and busted, a few trees and large boulders. That was it. I cased the shack thoroughly, studied the trees and rocks, then sat in front of the shack until ten p.m. listening to the intense silence, watching the stars, the trees. Even though I was sitting in a shadow, I felt exposed. I went down to the edge of the pond and sat behind a large boulder, worrying a little about snakes. My back was to the pond as I watched the shack. It seemed a secure stakeout. Maybe it was a half hour later when I heard a faint ripple of water behind me. Before

I could spin around, my head went into orbit.

I came to on the broken floor inside the shack, my head soaring. When my eyes started working I



didn't have to wonder what I'd been slugged with. Simpson was standing in front of me, a jagged, dirty rock in his left hand. It was so heavy he finally put it down at his weird feet, put it down gently; but the .45 in a plastic bag, which his right hand held, wasn't heavy: he kept it pointed at me. Something was tickling my neck. Keeping an eye on the .45, I slowly raised a hand to the back of my neck and felt blood.

For a moment I wondered if I were still out, maybe dreaming, for Simpson looked really out of this

world in a black rubber scuba suit, fins, air tanks on his back, face mask raised onto his dark hair. His potbelly in that suit looked comical, if I were in a laughing mood. He said, "Well now, Mr. Ash, you're a dumb private eye, sitting with your back to the water and to me. As you see, I found the diamond."

Either his voice was shrill or something was wrong with my hearing. I was having trouble keeping my throbbing head on my thick neck, getting the dim scene in focus. My wallet and gun were lying on the other end of the busted floor, so Simpson knew all about me.

"Daisy hired you, of course, but why?"

"To find Nick's killer—you," I said, but not a sound came out.

Simpson waved the .45. "Perhaps a crack across your stupid head will loosen your big tongue!" he shrilled.

"To find Nick's killer—you!" Now the words came bursting out of my mouth. "Talk about dummies I knew it had to be you from the go. Inventing Carlos was childish." Glancing at the .45, I wondered why I was talking so big.

The jeweler shrugged. "I didn't expect the loon to die. He brought me the finest diamonds I've ever seen, with a cock and bull story

about a flying saucer. But I'll find his mine yet. He had this great stone hidden under the pond water, and someplace in this quarry I'll find his mine. It'll be the greatest strike in diamond history. I'll have plenty of time to hunt for it, after I take care of you."

"Knock me off and you're bagged. I left a report with my secretary about looking for you, so don't . . ."

"Don't hand me that garbage, Ash, I'm not buying it. I'll merely tie rocks around your big feet and toss you in. The pond is fifty feet deep and there are fish in there, so you'll be a skeleton—should you ever come to the surface. And I have an alibi worked out for tonight, which hardly concerns you. Things are working for me. I'll—"

"You're running in bad luck, Simpson. They haven't abolished the death penalty in this state yet!"

"Enough of this chatter, Ash. I'm going to tie your feet now. I assume you know about a .45; at this range you'll be in shreds. I don't care if I toss you in the pond in one piece or a hundred. If you want to die the hard way, try something, make me shoot you."

He stepped forward, walking awkwardly with the fins on his feet, and pulled a length of heavy rope from around his waist with his left hand. Kneeling in front of

my feet, he pointed the gun down my thighs as he said, "Raise your feet, detective, slowly and gently."

In the dim light the .45 seemed bigger than a battleship gun as I stared into the barrel, certain I could see the grooves. I raised my feet a few inches, head fighting to leave my neck with the motion. Simpson got his rope around my ankles, tied them tightly in a clumsy knot with his left hand. Then he stood up, the heavy rubber suit making his face shine with sweat. Staring down at me, he said, "I wonder if you know anything about the mine, Ash? From the secretive way Nick acted, I'm certain Daisy doesn't know its location. Still, you are a detective and no telling what you may have stumbled upon in your snooping. A few jabs in your more tender spots will make you downright loud-mouthed."

"Listen, Simpson, we can work out a deal. Forget Daisy. You and I . . ." I began talking wildly, sitting up for punching room. My head seemed to be working again. There was a long chance I might clip him if he somehow missed me with the gun, the first shot. I might make it if I could pull myself together, get my reflexes going.

Simpson giggled, a high, insane sound. With his fat face framed by the dark rubber head piece, the

face glass on his forehead reflecting the faint light, plus that crazy laugh, Simpson actually looked like some sort of devil in person. When the giggle died he shrielled, "I do believe you are about to try something, detective. Strangely enough, I've always considered myself a meek man, yet when I was trying to make Nick talk, via a small soldering iron in my cellar, I found I enjoy torturing. Fantastic, but there it is. So don't try to con me, detective. There's only one possible deal; if you know the location of the mine, tell me, while you can still talk."

"Stop it, Simpson. Once I tell you, I'm dead." I fell back again. I'd have a better chance kicking him with my tied feet as he came in. "Let's both talk sense. Untie me and I'll take you to the diamond mind."

"Where is it, on the moon?" he cut in sarcastically. "Nick with his flying saucer garbage, and you with this—"

"Untie me and I'll show you the mine, for a forty percent cut, Simpson. Without me, you'll never find it."

"Garbage, detective, pure, low-grade slop!" he shrielled. "If you knew where the mine was, you wouldn't have tried to lure me out here with that stupid letter!"

"Simpson, how else could I have

arranged to see you? I keep telling you, Daisy is out. I know where the mine is and you know how to cut the stones, where to sell 'em. Forty percent for me and you take sixty. Just untie me and—"

"No! I've wasted too much time with you, detective. Now, I'm going—"

Suddenly, we both became aware of a faint humming sound, like the noise of a giant generator. The interior of the shack turned a blinding red and there was the smell of burning oxygen, a blanket of heat. Through the one broken window I saw that the entire outside was a flashing red. Simpson spun around and headed for the door. He shifted the .45 to his right hand, picked up the diamond with his left as he stepped through the doorway, out of my sight.

The red turned even brighter, and I had to close my eyes. Then I heard this short but piercing scream, the light dimmed, and it was night again. Bending forward, I untied my ankles, stumbled toward the doorway, picking up my wallet and gun on the way.

Speeding up toward the stars was a large, spinning, red ball, rings of blue blinking on and off underneath it. It was going at such incredible speed that within a few seconds it looked like a red star. Then it vanished.

I shut my eyes for a second, opening them slowly to accustom myself to the pale moonlight. I looked around quickly for Simpson—but he had vanished! Simpson had simply vanished! Without knowing why, I knelt and touched the dirt. It burned my fingertips. With a muffled scream of panic, I raced for my car. For a second the battery seemed dead. Then the lights came on, the starter turned over. I kept the gas pedal on the floor all the way to Daisy's house.

Once inside, I ran to her liquor cabinet, took a big swig of the first bottle I touched. It didn't do a damn thing for me. My nerves, my whole being, were drum tight.

Daisy came in, and gasped, "Bill, what's wrong? You're so pale, so terribly white."

"Listen, listen," I heard a strange voice mumble, then I got myself under control, told her what had happened. I finished with, "Whether you believe it or not, it's the truth! Simpson killed your husband, and the—the spaceship took him away!"

"I believe it," Daisy whispered, staring into my eyes.

"You really do? I'm not positive I believe it, but it's over. You're safe, Daisy. I'm driving back now. Wheeling a car relaxes me, and I'll explode if I don't do something. Tomorrow, or soon as I pull my-

self together, I'll return the balance of your \$1000. I put in three days, plus traveling to New York and—"

"No," she whispered, touching my face gently with a finger. "You're trembling, Bill."

"I'll calm down soon, I hope."

"Keep the money, Bill. You did your job, risked your life. What about the police? Are you going to tell them what happened?"

Shaking my head, I squeezed her hand as I pulled it from my face. "I should report it, but they'd never believe me. If I tried telling them, they'd fit me for a straitjacket."

"Of course. I understand. Neither of us will ever say a word about tonight. We can't."

"Right. Except for that letter I signed Carlos, there's no possible connection between us and Simp-

son. And the letter doesn't mean a damn thing. Simpson's clothes must be someplace around the quarry, but that's no link to us. Daisy, should you ever be questioned, you hired me to look into Nick's death, I found nothing, gave it up. That's it."

She nodded. There was an awkward moment as we walked toward the door. We shook hands. Then Daisy suddenly kissed me, hard, on the mouth, and whispered, "That's something else we'll never talk about again. Goodbye, Bill."

Once in my car, I started for home, driving fast. My nerves were still taut and I was so wide awake I doubted if I'd ever be able to sleep again. There was always the possibility of a humming, bright red nightmare awaiting me.



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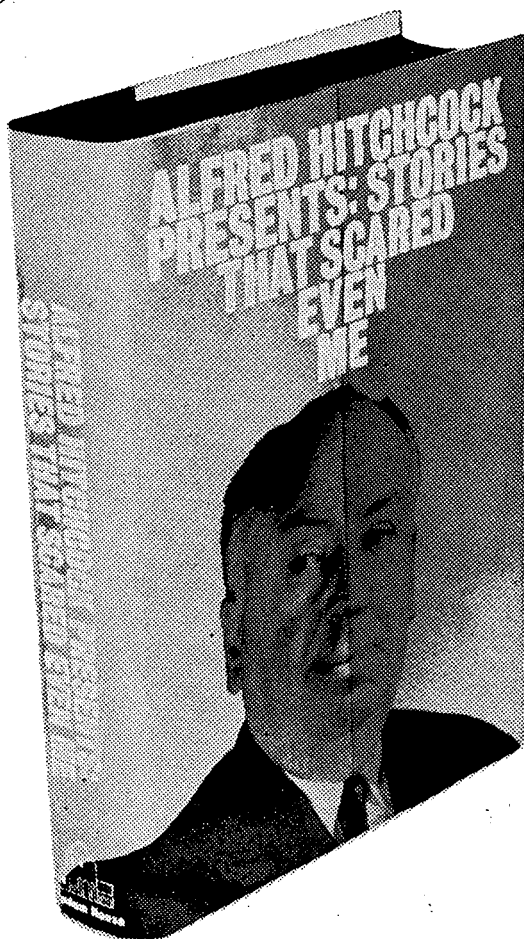
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